

SYRIA

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David L. Mack	1982-1985	Director, Office of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq Affairs, Washington, DC
Kenton W. Keith	1983-1985	USIA, Deputy Director for Near East and South Asia, Washington DC
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HARRISON M. SYMMES
Political Officer
Damascus (1949-1952)

Harrison M. Symmes was born in North Carolina in 1921. He graduated from the University of North Carolina with an A.B. in 1942, and completed an M.A. at George Washington University in 1948. He served in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1946. Mr. Symmes joined the Foreign Service in 1947. In addition to Damascus, he was posted to Egypt, Kuwait, Libya, and Jordan. Mr. Symmes was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1989.

Q: You represented really a new generation. You were right on the leading edge of a new generation. The old Foreign Service, which was often the way it is sometimes portrayed-- people still think it is today--but actually there was an old Foreign Service prior to World War II and a newer one.

SYMMES: Cookie pushers.

Q: Cookie pushers. An old Foreign Service, very social, and a new one really, consisting of people coming from different backgrounds and usually with military experience.

SYMMES: Right. Well, the other thing was, I found that there was no way to get to know the local people in that atmosphere. First of all, we were so taken up, we had to go to all kinds of things to which we were invited. We had met two young Egyptian engineers on our way out to Alexandria. The consul general found out we were seeing something of them, and he said, "They aren't really the people you are supposed to be in touch with." That kind of thing. So I was ready to get out of the Foreign Service when word came that I'd been assigned to Damascus as political officer. I later found out that people back in Washington and in Cairo--I can't name any of these people but people who knew what I was going through with the kind of boss I had and in that situation--recognized in me some qualities that weren't being used and said, "Before this guy gets kicked out on probation, let's give him a chance to do something." So I was rewarded for my 18 months in Alexandria by being sent to Damascus as political officer.

Q: Could you describe the situation as you saw it and what we were doing in Damascus? You were there from 1949 to 1952.

SYMMES: Damascus was then one of the few remaining legations. We had a minister there, James Hugh Keeley, a wonderful man who had been there earlier on in the '20s and who had become, by reason of his service in that part of the world, very, very pro-Arab and very ardently interested in seeing what he would call justice done in the Palestine situation, which by then had become a key factor in Middle Eastern policy.

Q: Israel had been established in 1948.

SYMMES: Israel had declared its independence in May of '48 and, of course, Palestine had been partitioned in November of '47.

Q: The first war...

SYMMES: The first Arab-Israeli war had taken place in '48.

Q: So Israel was a fact, and you were in Syria.

SYMMES: And we had armistice agreements which had been made in '49 and there was a mixed armistice commission between Lebanon and Israel, between Syria and Israel, and between Jordan and Israel. I've forgotten now whether there was one between Egypt or not, but I don't think there was.

So when I got to Damascus, one of the principal issues was the continuing border unrest between Syria and Israel. At that time, Syria, as it was later, was by far the more activist of the Arab states and the situations were just boiling over constantly between Syria and Israel.

At the same time--I got to Syria just as there was a coup d' état--a colonel named Husni Al-Za'im had overthrown a civilian government, some old fogies who had come out of the Arab

Nationalist movement -- I'd been in Damascus about six weeks or so when Za'im was overthrown. [Laughter] Then we had a succession of coups d'etat. Every few months there would be either a violent, more or less violent, or not so violent coup d' état behind the scenes.

There was a great ferment between more strongly nationalist people who wanted to take a harder line toward Israel, and that was certainly part of a very complicated political situation, but there was in addition to that a great ferment about what the middle class, what the sort of mass of people in Syrian society were going to get out of being an independent country. They were tired of the sort of old landholder, wealthy leftover Turkish empire people and mandate people who had been buttressed by the French when they controlled Syria up until the Second World War. They had learned a great deal, many of them from American University Beirut, but also from the more widespread Arab nationalist movement which went back to a number of Egyptians like Jamal Al- Din Al-Afghani and so on, who had a notion of using the Arab culture as a means of developing a nation in that area.

So these people, many of them educated in France and some educated at AUB, the American University Beirut, wanted economic and social changes. Later on some of them began to flirt with forms of socialism, even with the communists. But this was greatly exaggerated by us principally and by Westerners, who, any time they couldn't understand something in those days or didn't like the way it was going, would label it as a communist movement. There was very little communism in the Arab world ever.

So there we were with these people fighting their governments, and changing their governments as I say, either violently or behind the scene in some way because of the attitudes of those governments toward Israel, because of the attitudes of those governments toward what they called the imperialists, the French and the British. And of course the French and the British were still actively trying to retain their colonialist positions in that part of the world. So it made a very complicated political situation extremely interesting to me.

Q: You were sort of parachuted into a very volatile position in Syria at the time of all this ferment. As a political officer, how did you operate? What did you do? How did you keep in touch?

SYMMES: Obviously I'd never been a political officer before, and there is no textbook on how to be one. At least there wasn't in those days. FSI didn't tell us a great deal about it. One could read typical political reports on a desk before going overseas. You spent a week or so on the desk reviewing what was coming in and saw what a political officer did. And one could talk to and look up political officers in places he visited, such as Cairo. But much of it was by guess and by God as to what you were supposed to do. Now we'd get certain kinds of directives about what the Department and the other agencies of the government were interested in, what they wanted to know, what our foreign policy interests were.

By the time I got there, they were revising the Foreign Service manual. It had been called the Foreign Service Regulations, and it had a section on what our political interests were in a broad way and how we went about doing the job. But a lot of it I had to learn on the job. Much of it was getting out to talk to people. Now, one advantage that I had in Damascus in those days was that I had French even though I didn't have Arabic, I was only just learning Arabic, got started

taking classes in Egypt and then I continued these classes in Damascus, ultimately under an FSI arrangement. I didn't have much Arabic, but I did have French. And, of course, most of the educated people in Syria spoke French. And a lot of the...

Q: It had a lot of the French colony.

SYMMES: Yes. A lot of the French mandate. And a lot of the ordinary people spoke French. So I was able to get in touch with people, the politicians and so on, and I was a real beaver. I would go around and see people Americans had never talked to before.

Q: Try to pass on a feel for the technique of this. What would you do? In other words, you'd be sitting at your desk and say, "All right, what do I do today?"

SYMMES: Well, one of the most important things to do was to talk to the locals who worked in the embassy. We had a terribly good translator/interpreter who came from an upper- class Damascus family, an old family, who worked for the legation and who took a shine to me. And I liked him very much. I would go to him, and there were other old-line local employees and I would talk to them and ask them all kinds of biographical information, who fits into where and who plugs in where and so on. I was doing a lot of what we called in those days, confidential biographic reports on people. And I found that a very good way of knowing how things worked.

We would go out and go into cafés and drink coffee and play tric-trac (or backgammon) or chess and meet people that way. I called on, of course, all of the government officials who would give me an appointment and got to know them, principally the political ones since I wasn't the economic officer. There were scads of newspapers and so I would call on the newspaper editors, most of whom also were calling on us, and particularly political officers because they always conceived of a political officer primarily as an intelligence officer, because that's what the French and British officials were in their view. And they were always out to get a subsidy for their newspaper to get the right kinds of editorials printed about America or whatever.

So that was the kind of thing I did. And, of course, I read every local newspaper I could get my hands on. We had a good translation service. I read as much background information as I could so that when I talked to these people I'd know something about the ways the various Christian sects broke down and related to each other. And the same thing with the Islamic sects. Thus, I was giving myself an area studies course. I was really doing graduate work in Near Eastern research as much as anything else. I found it an exciting period.

Q: What were American interests there? Did you say you were receiving direction on your reporting from a consul general who was dedicated to the Arab cause?

SYMMES: A minister. Yes.

Q: How did this work?

SYMMES: Well, he, of course, generally reviewed anything that went out. He was a fair-minded man and even if he disagreed he would allow things to go out even though he would say, "Don't

you think..."

Q: *Who are you mentioning?*

SYMMES: James Hugh Keeley. I disagreed with him rather basically. He was terribly partisan and I thought he tended to lack objectivity and he knew I felt that way. Later on we had a Deputy Chief of Mission who in some ways was even more subjective in his views than Keeley was. I would have very strong disagreements with this person and, in fact, on two or three occasions availed myself of the Foreign Service Manual regulations on political reporting to say, "I disagree with your recommended changes in my dispatch and I want it to go in as I wrote it. I certainly recognize the right of you . . .," the deputy chief of mission or the minister or later the ambassador, " . . .to dissent from it."

Q: *What were the issues usually?*

SYMMES: Generally the issues that I found I disagreed with people about were the manner in which they reported the clashes between the Israelis and the Syrians on the border. As I say, there was a mixed armistice commission. And the mixed armistice commission was made up of military officers and some civilians from the Western countries. We had, generally, American Marine officers serving on this commission and many of them would have what I call a sort of a military blinder view of what was taking place, without appreciating the political ramifications. And they would come up to the legation, later the embassy, and would tell anybody who would listen, off the record, what was going on and how the Israelis had done something bad. You know, it was generally the Israelis that had done something bad; it was never the Syrians. This, of course, was from people who were stationed on the Syrian side of the border, and the military people on the Israeli side were generally giving just as much a bigoted view on the other side. And I found out that in some cases a degree of anti-Semitism, blatant anti-Semitism, was coming out, which galled me very much because I've never had a drop of that in my views and blood and so on. I did not want to lend myself to a report on how bad the Israelis had been when I had no way of checking the accuracy of it. I mean, after all, these were human beings that were seeing these particular infractions and so on. And to take one person's view of who had started shooting or where the incident had taken place, it seemed to me was inaccurate and false reporting. And so I just refused to lend myself to that and I would generally say this to the DCM, the deputy chief of mission. He would have gotten an earful from one of these officers and would say, "Here it is and I've written out notes. Prepare a report on it."

I'd say, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do that. It seems to me this is bias. We don't have both sides."

"Well, you don't have to have both sides. Just report it as what was given to us."

And I'd say, "Well, I don't want to lend myself to that."

So there was this kind of thing, generally, that I had difficulty with.

Now once in a while, because I developed sooner or later a very broad contact with the political

factions, I would come up with a report that was not consistent with views that the Department had previously held about what was going on and what these particular parties were up to. And I can recall one instance when I worked on a report for months and I really had terribly good sources. It was a rather lengthy report. I sent it in to the DCM to be reviewed and he sent it back with a note on it saying, "What is Lewis Jones going to think when he reads this?" Lewis Jones was then the Director of Near East Affairs. And in my brash--I was very brash in those days--way sent back a note saying, "I don't care!" [Laughter] I did.

Q: What was the departmental attitude that you felt you should be supporting or not supporting on the situation appropriate to Syria?

SYMMES: At that time in the larger setting, we were attempting to bolster primarily the moribund British position. In many ways it was a terribly mistaken policy because the British position was in many ways lost. It was also terribly unrealistic. The British did not have the power to carry out the so-called position or what was left of it. And we and they were developing things like the Middle Eastern Defense Organization by 1950. We were developing concepts by which we would bring together, hopefully, the countries in the Near East--and I say Near East rather than Middle East because it was this collection right around the Eastern Mediterranean--as a strategic defense against a presumed Soviet push into that region, principally into the Persian Gulf but also into the eastern Mediterranean. Obviously, this policy was designed to safeguard oil supply and, of course, British and American interests, and French interests in the oil fields of that area. Now, the interest in preserving that strategic position led us to support generally what was left of the British position and to a certain extent, the French position, although there was a great deal of in-fighting and suspicion and rivalry among the three countries. The French being low on the totem pole, but still having ways of causing and fomenting trouble.

So the Department's view was that we should, wherever possible, cooperate with the British, which we did. We exchanged a great deal of intelligence and general political information. I was always in touch with my British political officer colleagues.

Q: The British carryover from the wartime alliance.

SYMMES: That's exactly right. And yet at the same time, to me it seemed we were neglecting what was apparent. That to the extent we supported these vestiges of imperialism and colonialism -- and they were more than that in some cases, they were very strong vestiges at least -- to that degree we were incurring the same odium and were becoming in place of the British and the French the whipping boy for the nationalists in the region.

In any case, what we were trying to do in general was to preserve that Western position in the Middle East...

Q: A question has been asked by a rather distinguished professor of American diplomatic history--not a question but a thesis--that said, "Challenge some of the assumptions that we had at the time." You've already alluded to them, but maybe talk a little more. Did we see a Soviet threat, or was it a communist threat there? Was this true? Was this overriding much of our reporting, our view, and do you feel it was justified?

SYMMES: I think it was extremely exaggerated. I thought so at the time. I tried to leaven my own reporting where possible to play it down. Not to undermine our policy or anything like that but because I just didn't think it was right.

In my view--and to a certain extent I'm looking back now and perhaps looking more wisely at the situation than I did at the time--I think at the time I can say this is correct, it seemed to me that whatever communist potential or Soviet potential there was in that part of the world that I was familiar with and with what I read about the rest of it, even extending to Iran, grew out of the unhappiness of those people with the leftover colonial situation. And they were so unhappy with that leftover imperialist and colonialist, social and economic situation and their lack of true political independence because of that, that they would turn, as some of the Arabs would say, we would "make an alliance with the devil," if it would save us from this particular situation.

Thus, it seemed to me that to the extent that the Soviets and the communists in general could make any in-roads in that area that they would do so out of the frustration of the people who saw no other way to get out of what you might call their bondage. Their political, economical social bondage. And this was true of such groups in Syria at the time, as the Islamic socialists. Islam just couldn't countenance in any way, there's never been anybody who knew anything about Islam who thought it could countenance any kind of association with communism, with Marxism--it's just oil and water. And the Islamic socialists on the other hand at one point were playing footsie with the communists simply as a way to manipulate them, not because they had any kind of sympathy for them. The same thing happened with what was called the Arab Resurrection Party, we later called it the Ba'ath, which took over in Syria and Iraq later on, and still runs both countries in a way. The Ba'ath ideology was based on French socialist ideas. Those people had no interest whatsoever in communism and in fact were suspicious of it. There were other kinds of little fragmentary socialist parties, secular in orientation which had nothing to do with communism. But on the other hand, if they felt they could ring our bell by saying something good about the communists or about the Soviets because of our policy on Israel or because of our support of the British and French economic positions or the remnants in those countries, they would do so. [Laughter] We couldn't understand this and it just became easy as it was at the time and particularly in the era of McCarthyism to say "Oh, the Soviet menace is awful. We've got to do everything we can to stop them."

Q: I don't want to overplay this, saying that our foreign policy apparatus came from an earlier era of one where we looked upon the colonial powers as being a stabilizing power and we were used to playing a sort of poor country cousin to the British and the French. There were areas where we didn't want to get too involved, and so we would tend to view nationalism with suspicion because it was a challenge to the old way of things. And very soon particularly intense nationalism, which is somewhat unpredictable, became associated with communism. Do you think there was that in there?

SYMMES: I certainly do. Because after all we Americans had poked at British and French imperialism, in what I would call the inter-war period, in such a way that the British and French just despised any sort of free-thinking American political writer or academician who went after imperialism and tried to promote democracy and so on. The necessities of the wartime alliance

forced us to play that down so that if you look at what was taking place in the academic world and to a certain degree in our foreign policy pronouncements between the two wars, we were being far more critical before the Second World War than we were after it because of the obligations of the alliance.

Q: Yes. That was the difference between having responsibility and not having responsibility.

SYMMES: That's right. But there was also something else, and that is that I think we had not previously gone far enough in our own thinking and we had no vision of what kind of world we thought we wanted for ourselves from the standpoint of our new national interest and what kind of world would be best for the world itself. Since we hadn't thought that through, I think we carried out, or became mired in, what I consider one of our worst what you might call foreign policy cultural mistakes. And by that I mean foreign policy procedural attitudes. And that is, that as a country, as a foreign policy establishment, we simply do not know how to, and are unwilling to, cut our losses when we are faced with a bad policy. Instead of finding a way to develop a rationale to change that policy quietly and behind the scenes and let it evolve, instead of doing that, we just pour good money after bad. I've seen this in any number of foreign policy situations that I have been personally very much involved in. And I've made recommendations on occasion--we can talk about some of those if you want to later--in which I think if we had carried out those recommendations, we would have substantially improved the situation in the Middle East. It's simply because we seem unwilling to face the fire of being caught at having changed our policy. Part of that is not having, as I say, a view of what we really want, but part of it is just built into us. It's easier to go on the same old way than it is to face up to it, to take the responsibility for developing a public relations rationale such as: "Oh, no. We haven't changed our policy; we're just not interfering. We're letting nature take its course." [Laughter]

Q: How much did McCarthyism--we're talking about the late '40s, early '50s--play in the atmosphere in your reporting?

SYMMES: Well, in my own case, very little. First of all, I was too brash. [Laughter] And too independent to let it. I've always been extremely liberal in my own political thinking and I was really angry about McCarthy. And although I wouldn't do anything just to wave a flag or something like that, it never influenced my reporting at all and there really wasn't much opportunity for it to do so. I perhaps was lucky in that when I did say something about local communism or Marxism or something like that, I did it in an objective way so that I put it in a context of the pros/cons, rights/wrongs and that kind of thing. So it didn't really enter into it. But in terms of how I felt at the time and how I think some of my colleagues felt, it was extremely unpleasant. We were ashamed of it in terms of how it made us look to the rest of the world, to the British and French and our local contacts and colleagues. What was always so strange to me was that a lot of this McCarthyism and security investigation, Scott McLeod, and purifying the State Department and so on, was after homosexuals, and yet I had a homosexual boss in my first post who was flagrant and had a young man living with him and so on. Later on there was an ambassador in a Near Eastern country in 1954 even who was a known homosexual and there were other people whom I knew. Despite all this business about being a security risk and so on, these people were never touched. And it just seemed to me somewhat unreal that we were making all this noise and not doing anything about it.

Q: It was really more a political than a moral matter in the way things actually were carried out.

SYMMES: Well, it wasn't so much--and I want to make clear that I'm not making a moral judgment myself--what I'm saying is that the general attitude at the time was that these people, because of their lifestyles and because they hadn't really come out of the closet in those days, were extremely insecure because of the possibility of blackmail, because they were still in the closet and so on. From the security standpoint, other people were taking lie detector tests all over the place. I mean, it wasn't just whether or not you were a homosexual, but in those days if you were philandering and having an affair with somebody not your wife, you were in bad trouble, theoretically, because you were susceptible to blackmail and therefore were a security risk. I found that at the time amazing. In fact today I can still give you no effective explanation for it.

Q: You went to Arabic training in 1952. Now you've been in the Arab world for two posts and you were then going in with Arabists and training, and could you talk a little about the culture of the Arabists? Because the Arabists in the State Department have had both a good name and a bad name, because, one, they're too aligned to the Arab world and there is always the implied idea that somehow or another they're anti-Semitic because their view towards Israel and all? Also could you talk a little about how you felt about Israel and the Arab world and all.

SYMMES: I think that much of the what you might call the public view of the Arabists was deserved. I think that you can trace it to a number of things. First of all, many of our language programs were not well conceived at the time. They were taken over in some cases by linguists, academicians, who had a particular kind of ax to grind and this was certainly true in the Arab situation. And these people who might be terribly good linguists or area specialists, historians, that kind of thing, sometimes had no political sensitivity or practical ideas about what was needed by a Foreign Service Officer who was going to use Arabic and area expertise. Thus, I would say our programs were somewhat faulted.

Beyond that, to the Service itself -- by the kind of premium it placed on being a European specialist and being involved in what you might call the larger world interests -- getting involved in the Arab world was less important. It was sort of on the back burner in many ways. And this meant that we did not always attract the highest qualified officers. When I say that, I mean people who were good professionally in what we call political work or economic work or political military work and also we didn't appreciate how important it was to have Arabists in the consular establishment. I, as a vice consul in my first post, had learned you are at the mercy of a person translating if you're making a determination about citizenship or about the motives of a visa applicant. If you don't have a very good translator or interpreter or if you don't speak the language yourself, you won't know sometimes what's really being said. So I found that at least in Arabic we didn't have a good notion of what we wanted for the Arabists and sometimes Personnel gave us people who thought, "Well, I've got to find some way to get ahead and get into political work. Therefore, since I can't get into Soviet language and area and I can't get into Japanese or something else, I'll take Arabic." And thus we got sort of a hodgepodge of people. There were at the time I went in no really adequate language aptitude tests and for the most part no tests were given to people. Training slots were just filled, typically.

As you can see, I wear two hearing aids today. My hearing, according to the audiologists, hasn't changed since my ears were injured in the war. [Laughter] And I can tell you audiologists say, "How in the world did you ever learn Arabic? Either you had a very high aptitude or something, or you had to get people to repeat an awful lot." Because the nature of the language is such that the discriminations between consonants become terribly important. Well, I'm making too much of this.

The selection of people was poor and it continued so. After I had become an Arabist, passed the test and so on to get the label and had used the language fluently, back in the States in the late '50s and the '60s I was on the Language and Area Subcommittee of the Foreign Service Association. We worked with people at FSI and in Personnel to try to get first of all better training, more realistic training, to get a different approach toward the linguistic needs, what kind of Arabic was needed, that is whether it's spoken colloquial, classical, something called modern standard or whatever. And what kind of area training, what kinds of people you wanted in it, what their capabilities ought to be, how they would be assigned, how many language positions there would be. Through that experience I found that the program produced some excellent people. I can name you some. Talcott Seelye, Richard Parker, Richard Murphy, and there are others, but those stand out. It produced some people who at the end of two years were about as good in Arabic as my wife was in kitchen Arabic. [Laughter] And who had no real understanding or feel for the area's history, its ways of doing things and so on. I can recall a colleague who went through a year of training and who ended up in a post in the Arab world. Bill Stoltzfus who was another good Arabist, passed through that place and later came down to Kuwait where I then was, and said, "Do you know, Mr. X is the most fluent person in Arabic I've ever heard on 90 words." That was the kind of thing we were doing in the Arabic training program.

So in many ways it was a failure and some of the people who were in it, I think, had a degree of anti-Semitism. They just couldn't put in balance the--how should I put it--the feelings, the needs, the pressures that were on the Israelis and on the American Jews and the pressures that were on the Arabs. They saw the world in blacks and whites. There were no grays. I found throughout my career when I was working on anything having to do with the Near East that I had to be very careful about some of my colleagues. First of all by what I said because they would say I was pro-Israeli, but also about their reporting, how they got their facts, how they made their conclusions and so on. Some of them simply could not separate out the political truths that were important to us from the standpoint of our national interests from their own personal points of view and biases.

Q: Was there anything in the training or endemic to the position, and the fact that you're in the Arab world, that made you more partisan, do you think? Or was it more that their minds were set before they went in?

SYMMES: I think there was nothing significant in training to cause it. There was one man who was on the faculty at FSI, and I won't name his name, who was so terribly partisan that he was something of a joke to any person who had objectivity. Now there were others who would cite him as a great authority but they were people who, as I would put it, shared his anti-Semitic streak anyway. [Laughter] But by and large in the training, certainly in the language itself, there was little opportunity for any bias to creep in.

In the area training, as I say, there was at least one and maybe some other people who would come over and talk and give a biased view. But it stuck out if one were objective and I don't think it mattered very much.

Q: Talking about bias, I think one has to separate a certain amount. There is a tendency to try to lump anti-Israeli and anti-Semitism and this does not necessarily have to hold true.

SYMMES: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

JAMES F. LEONARD
Junior Officer
Damascus (1949-1951)

James F. Leonard was born in Pennsylvania in 1920. He received a bachelor's degree from Princeton University and served in the U.S. Army from 1942-1946. Mr. Leonard entered the Foreign Service in 1948. His career included positions in China (Taiwan), France, Russia, and Syria. This interview was conducted by Warren Unna on March 10, 1993.

Q: Well, going back to your first foreign assignment which I suppose was the first meaningful one and this was Damascus?

LEONARD: That's right, yes.

Q: I was looking back in some of the clips, and I see there was a bit of activity there. There was a coup I think, and there was the burning down of the Embassy, there was an attack on it, and things like that ...

LEONARD: Yes, it was a reasonably exciting first post . There was a coup just before we got there. Then there was another coup about six months later, and still another one after that. A very unstable political situation. They kept on having coups even after we left. I was there about two and a half years.

Q: And wasn't the head of government assassinated?

LEONARD: Yes. The second coup, he was. The first one was a peaceful coup. And then the second coup, they killed the big man and his prime minister both. They went on from there and actually developed a very bloody record over the following years. It only stabilized when (Hafez Al Assad) came in. I think it is now twenty, twenty-five years ago. In fact, he's said to have ruled Syria longer than anyone since the Omayyad caliphs in the eighth century.

Q: He came in when you were still there?

LEONARD: No, he came in afterwards. He came in about 1965 I think.

Q: So, this is sort of a baptism of fire for a first foreign post in the middle of a coup.

LEONARD: Well, in a way, and yet there was no personal danger involved. In fact our relations with the Syrians were very friendly in that period. They were very bitter about the creation of the state of Israel which had taken place the previous year, but didn't take that out on us in personal terms. We enjoyed the post very much and developed a few good friends among the Syrians, etc. It was a very enjoyable and a very small Embassy. In fact it wasn't even an Embassy in technical terms, it was a Legation. I don't think we have any legations anymore, but at that time that was what we had in the smaller countries. Even a junior officer was in daily touch with the Ambassador and able to follow the political events quite closely. We lived right next door to the CIA Station Chief who was a very lively and colorful figure. So it was a very interesting introduction to the Foreign Service life.

Q: But the Legation was bombed. Was that before you came?

LEONARD: No it was bombed actually ... I was talking on the telephone with the marine guard when it happened.

Q: Not much of a bomb then?

LEONARD: Not much of a bomb. It blew the poor guy across the room and didn't hurt him at all.

Q: But the Leonards didn't say: "This is it, we're going back home."?

LEONARD: No.

WILLIAM D. BREWER
Political Officer
Damascus (1951-1954)

Ambassador William D. Brewer was born in Connecticut in 1922. He received a B.A. degree from Williams College and an M.A. degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He entered the Foreign Service in 1947. He served overseas in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Afghanistan, and in Washington, DC as desk officer for Arab Affairs and Country Director for Arabian Peninsular States. He was appointed ambassador to Mauritius in 1970 and Ambassador to Sudan in 1973. Ambassador Brewer was interviewed by Malcolm Thompson in 1988.

Q: Did you intend from the start to specialize in the Near East and the Arab world?

BREWER: Well, that came a little later but I still remember. I was in graduate school, at Fletcher, and a friend of mine and I were in my room and we were

discussing what we would do in the eventuality that we might pass the Foreign Service exam. And we decided that area expertise was probably to be sought after, and I concluded at that time that the Near East, where I understood there were tremendous reserves of petroleum, would be an area that would be increasingly important to the United States and therefore I said to this friend of mine at graduate school, "I think if I get into the Foreign Service, I will specialize in the Near East."

Q: Very good. I would like to concentrate on your more senior assignments without overlooking any of your earlier posts. Is there anything of special interest you would like to comment on involving these earlier years? For example, when we served together in Damascus, in the early 1950s?

BREWER: Well, yes, there is, Malcolm, but if I could I would like to go back before we met in Damascus to my second assignment which was in Saudi Arabia because, although I was technically a very junior officer, I was in fact at the post what would now be called Acting DCM for six months, and actually was in charge of the Embassy in Saudi Arabia for a brief period--a week or ten days--when I was a Third Secretary. So I had some experience even at that stage which I think is of interest in connection with your project.

And in particular two things occurred which I think are useful to comment on: the first is that I was in Jeddah and keeping close track of the negotiations between ARAMCO and the Saudi Arabian government which led up to the conclusion in December 1950 of the first 50-50 profit sharing agreement between an oil company and a Near Eastern government. Prior to that time there had been agreements under which royalty had been paid and this system was not producing revenue which the Saudi government wished, and ARAMCO had secured a ruling from, I guess, the Attorney General, the Department of Treasury, anyway Washington, that the tax deducted by Saudi Arabia as part of this 50-50 split could be counted as a business expense in figuring their American income tax. So on that basis there were very complex negotiations which-- I don't need to go into in detail--but which produced this 50-50 formula under which the profits were shared equally between Saudi Arabia and ARAMCO.

Q: What was your role in all this?

BREWER: My role was in following the negotiations and in reporting them to Washington because that was the first news that Washington had that the agreement had been concluded. But parallel to that we at the Embassy were considering how the Saudi government, could modernize its very antiquated fiscal arrangements. In fact I often thought it was like being in the Middle Ages. If you wanted to go down to send a cable, for example, you had to carry a large sack of silver rials because the only currency in the country was this full-bodied rial and it was very difficult to conduct large transactions with these vast amounts of small heavy coins. And we thought Saudi Arabia very badly needed a modern financial structure and in particular a central bank. And also, in due course, paper currency.

My role was to encourage and support the visits to Saudi Arabia by our Treasury representatives from Cairo over a period of months. These Treasury representatives made a number of preliminary suggestions and as a result of all this activity we finally decided that the thing to do was to encourage the Saudi government to request our assistance in providing some technical

expertise which would assist them in setting up a central bank. And this was done and the Saudis agreed that they were going to need some assistance, and we cabled Washington, and they agreed, and they went out and they found a man who had been financial adviser, I believe, to Chiang Kai-shek, and had been an official in the State Department at one stage of the game, Arthur Young, a very able man, to advise the Saudis on setting up a central bank.

He came out to Saudi Arabia, and I met him at the airfield, and briefed him and we got him started and in due course he did propose what came to be known--they avoided the term "bank" because, you know, the shari'a (Islamic Law) does not sanction the payment of interest and the Saudis do not like the use of the term "bank", but essentially it's a central bank--he proposed the arrangements which resulted in the founding of the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency. And that is the basis of the modern Saudi financial system which, of course, is now one of the strongest in the world.

Q: Very interesting. That was in 1950 and '51. After that I believe you were assigned to Damascus as a Political Officer?

BREWER: That's right.

Q: Do you care to comment on that assignment?

BREWER: Well, yes, I thought that was extremely interesting for my development as an Arabic language and area officer because at that time--I don't know whether it's still true--the Arab world as a whole could be likened to a tube of toothpaste and Syria was the paste that always came out the end of the tube no matter where you put the pressure. It was the cockpit, and also the prize, of Arab politics. The two chief competitors were Cairo and Baghdad but somewhere in the middle, although leaning more toward Cairo in the period you and I were there, was Saudi Arabia, particularly with financial support. In fact I remember when still in Saudi Arabia, the Saudis extending a \$6 million loan which I think turned out to be a gift to a Syrian dictator, Adib Shishakli shortly after his coup d'etat which established him in power. So the opportunity to head the Political Section in Damascus during this period gave me an unrivaled opportunity to learn about the intricacies of inter-Arab politics, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world because it was fascinating.

(Footnote Added: This was also the period which witnessed the earliest tentative Soviet moves into the Near East, including Syria. The dynamics of this were made plain to me from the Jisr Banat Yacub ("Daughters of Jacob Bridge") diversion dispute in September-October, 1953. The Israelis had begun earth-moving operations near the bridge to divert the flow of the Jordan River, in an area which lay clearly in the Syro-Israeli Demilitarized Zone (DZ) from which Syrian troops had withdrawn after the armistice agreement between the two countries. The Syrian position, which seemed to us clearly supported by the language of the armistice agreement, was that no actions could be taken in the DZ without the concurrence of both sides. Damascus accordingly sought redress via a Security Council resolution condemning Israel. In the initial maneuvering over language, the USG supported the Syrians. A seven-point condemnation of Israel was drafted. However, at the last minute an eighth point was added to the effect that neither side could indefinitely block "development" in the DZ. This was defended by our UN

delegation as "sounding a positive note". Of course, Embassy Damascus objected that this in effect undercut the entire resolution. For our pains we were simply cut out of the final exchanges of telegrams with the Department. The next text was put to a vote--and was promptly vetoed by the USSR.

This Soviet action represented Moscow's first overt move to improve its position with the Syrians and led to close Syro-Soviet collaboration by 1957. I have always felt that we did ourselves no service by thus offering the Russians an opening to move into the Near East.)

Q: Very good. Your next assignment apparently was in Kuwait?

BREWER: Well, yes, but maybe before we move on to Kuwait there's one other thing that I ought to mention in respect to the assignment in Damascus. And that is that, while we sought to develop good relations with the Syrians, we had great difficulty even at that time because of the creation of the State of Israel and our support for its creation. And you will recall that it was in 1954, I think, or 1955, that the efforts that culminated in the Baghdad Pact began to be made, the first being the Turko-Iraqi Pact which I think was in early 1955. And the question came up about the adherence to this agreement of other Arab countries. My recollection is that the Department encouraged all of us in the Arab world to try and see if we couldn't encourage adherence in the interest of building an effective barrier against the Communist expansion in that part of the world. However, the closer we came to soliciting Syrian adherence, and indicating to the Syrians that maybe there might be something in it for the Syrians, the more the Department seemed to draw back from any involvement of Syria in the Baghdad Pact. And, of course, as you know Syria never joined the Baghdad Pact. The government at the time later fell and was replaced by an anti-western government, and it has always been my speculation, but nothing that one can prove, that our failure to move forward at that time, which I think we did primarily because we were scared that the Syrians were going to want arms from us, and we were not going to provide them because of the proximity of Syria to Israel, that this contributed to Syria's turn to the Soviet Union and its acceptance of Soviet arms in the ensuing period after you and I had left Damascus.

Q: Do you believe that it could have been otherwise perhaps if our policy had been different?

BREWER: Well, I think it could have been because we after all did at a later stage provide substantial arms to Jordan and those arms have not been used against Israel. Had We provided similar arms to the Syrian government, we would have had more influence with Damascus than we in fact had, while the arms would not in fact have posed a significant threat to Israel but, to the contrary, would have reassured the Syrians--who, of course, were concerned that Israel might attack them. From a Syrian standpoint this was a question and concern to them, and it might have facilitated an earlier settlement of this very knotty problem.

Q: In other words, it was probably more of a domestic political decision that governed our policy in this respect. Shall we say the influence of the Jewish lobby on the Congress?

BREWER: Well, I'm not sure that it was that calculable at that time, but I think those considerations probably were not absent from the minds of top policy-makers in Washington. I do not recall that there was any outcry in the Congress or anything at that time. This was after all

in 1955 and still pretty early in the game.

CARLETON S. COON, JR.
Economic Officer
Damascus (1952-1956)

Ambassador Carleton S. Coon, Jr. was born in Paris in 1927 to American parents. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and then served in the High Commission in Germany. After graduating from Harvard University, Mr. Coon joined the Foreign Service and served in Kathmandu, Damascus, New Delhi, and Washington, DC. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on October 26, 1989.

Q: I guess we better move on. You had quite a change of scene. You went to the Middle East. You went to Damascus in 1952 to '56 as Economic Officer. How did that assignment come about?

COON: I was going to be assigned to Bavaria to run one of the America Hauser down there in the USIA program. I was in Bonn. I talked to John Patton Davies, who was one of the grand old men of the Service who had gotten burned by McCarthy. In fact he was virtually destroyed by McCarthy, and he was sort of holed up licking his wounds in Bonn. And he said, "You shouldn't go to Bavaria. You should go to the Middle East with your background." So he talked me into Damascus.

Actually you've missed one rather amusing episode. As I was getting ready to go to Damascus, the consul in Rabat, John Dorman, began shrieking that his staff was being gutted because it was a 3-man post and one of his officers would be gone all summer.

Q: This was before Morocco...

COON: Yes. We had a Consulate in Rabat that was our principal post in Morocco. So they sent me, with my wife and two-and-a-half children, to Morocco for two months TDY to keep John Dorman happy. I'd already gotten a promotion, I was a second secretary, and John Dorman never heard of the Kreis Resident Program or anything like that. He was rather stuffy and a very proper Foreign Service Officer of the old school. Well, anyway, to make a long story short: I disappointed him very much because I didn't know the difference between a passport and a visa really. I was supposed to do a lot of consular work, and I was supposed to be fluent in French, and I wasn't. I was awful in French, and he didn't know what to do with me. So he took me around very properly--at least I had calling cards--and visited every other member of the consular corps on courtesy calls to announce my presence. Then he put me to work translating French language newspapers which anybody could have done. And then a few weeks later he took me around again to say farewell. And then I went on my way to Damascus feeling somewhat chastened by this, but rather less than convinced that the career Foreign Service--all of the old line--had a lock on all the wisdom of life.

Anyway, I got to Damascus, and I took over the Consular Section from Bill Eagleton who remains a close friend. Bill was glad to see me because his interests were political and he was just holding down the Consular Section with his left hand. I worked very hard to discover all about the consular routine. I got there just in time to learn all the old regulations and then in December they were changed by a new Act, and I had to learn that.

Q: What was the situation in Syria. We're talking...you were there '52 to '56. What was the situation at that time?

COON: Relatively stable. They only had one major coup, and in the preceding couple of years they'd had several. So everybody sort of complimented me on my good judgement in arriving during a period of calm. Relatively non-hostile. The Syrians were very sore at us over the Israeli business. I mean it was still a new experience for them being mad at us. And there were a lot of individual Syrians who had relatives in the United States, or wanted to go to the United States, or admired the United States, so there was a lot of goodwill there, too.

Q: This is almost hard to imagine. We're doing this interview in 1989 when the Syrians have been so hostile to us for so long.

COON: The Syrian government.

Q: Your Ambassador at that time was one of the great men of the Middle Eastern service, wasn't he? James Moose.

COON: Yes.

Q: How did he operate? What was your impression of the gentleman?

COON: Very quietly, and behind the scenes. He was a stickler for protocol but he was an Arabic scholar too, and he really understood a great deal more than he let on. He didn't have much interest in the Consular Section and he left before I moved over into the Economic Section which I did after about two-thirds of my time was over. So I never really got to know him the way Eagleton, or Atherton, or Bill Brewer did who were three of my colleagues there. But I had great admiration for him. Do you want anecdotes?

Q: Yes, I do. Very much so because I think these illustrate how...

COON: There was a little dried fruit and nut man from Amherst, Massachusetts who was brought over under a UN program to advise the Syrians on their nut trees, and their dried fruit trees. Of course they'd been growing nuts and drying their fruit back to a period where this gentlemen's ancestors were still living in caves, I think. But anyway, he was brash and feckless, a little guy. And the Secretary of the Agriculture Ministry had a cocktail party to receive him, and we were all there. He said, "What's your name?" I said, "Coon." He said, "Ha, ha, that's funny." Then he turned to a quiet gentleman who was standing there, and said, "What's your name?" The man stuck out his hand and said, "The name is James S. Moose, junior." "Ah," he said, "You're the Ambassador. Well, how nice. It must be awfully nice to be an Ambassador." "Well," said

Ambassador Moose, "There are various views on that." And then the visitor said, "Isn't it funny. Here we have two animals in the same reception. We've got Coon, and here we've got Moose." Moose, without turning a hair, and without changing his tone of voice, said, "Yes, there are many animals in the Foreign Service and in addition to Moose and Coon, there are Lyon, Tiger and Hare." And then he went on, I can't remember them all--Crowe--but he went through I'd say a dozen and a half. He picked them out and ran right through them. Then he turned on his heel and didn't speak to the guy again.

Q: Did you have much dealing with the Syrian officials?

COON: I learned a lot about dealing with foreign officials, yes. More later when I was doing economic work, than earlier. In the earlier stage, consular work, I was dealing mostly with police, and dealing through my local employees. Again, I could spin off hours worth of anecdotes about it, but I'll skip...

Q: I'd like to have a little feeling about what type of dealings--say with the police there at that time. Did you have any particular problems, trying to get Americans who had gotten in trouble or something?

COON: Oh, I had all kinds of consular problems. I could go on and on about them, but they were mostly of the Americans own makings and some of them involved born-again Christians insisting on handing out tracts and getting judged for that. There was one stupid woman who was married to a Syrian and divorced, and was talked into coming back with their child. Then the guy took the child and spirited it off and threw her out. She went home and I remember the headlines, "Tulsa Girl Sold at Syrian Slave Block" in the Tulsa newspaper and there was a certain amount of Congressional flak. I could go on at some length on that but then when I was in the economic side I really did cultivate some people in an attempt to get at sources of information.

I think the high point for me, and very, very instructive because it taught me a lot about how governments work, was this: There was a new five-year plan coming out and I was very anxious to figure out what was in it, and then give a report on it. I don't suppose anybody in Washington was that concerned, but anyway it was one of the big things in my job. So I cultivated this guy who I had already known some. I guess he had been trained in America, as I recall he spoke English. He worked in the guts of the organization that was doing the plan. So he let me in one day, and then let me have an advance look at it as it was just about to go to press. Here were all the different ministries, and different major sectors of the economy with a number of Syrian pounds in millions or something like that to be allocated to each for the next five years under the plan. And I have a bad habit, I'm quick at arithmetic, and I add things up when I go along. So I looked at this column, and I added it up, and the total was 70 million pounds greater than the sum of the individual constituent parts. I pointed this out to the guy, he said, "No, you must be wrong." He added it up three times and he scratched his head, and said, "Well, I guess we'll give it to the railway ministry." And they went to press that way. And that's the sort of thing...I mean a junior and an impressionable officer can derive a great deal of wisdom.

Q: Did you get free passes on the railway?

COON: No, no. I never told the Syrians about that obviously. I might have gotten the guy in trouble.

Q: What type of government did the Syrians have?

COON: Bureaucratic. The French had endowed them with a second class replica of their own government in ways of doing things.

Q: What about the feeling within our embassy in Damascus towards Israel? Did you find that you were an Arabist sitting there and saying, "Why are we throwing all this support towards Israel?" Or were things not black and white in those days?

COON: Things weren't quite as black and white. In the first place, I wasn't an Arabist. Eagleton had studied Arabic, Brewer had studied Arabic, and a number of these people had studied Arabic and they suggested that I go to Beirut and study Arabic when I finished with Damascus, but I declined. Yes, there was a feeling even then it was pretty obvious to those who were closely attuned to the facts that the creation of the State of Israel was probably the single most damaging thing to US prestige and interest abroad that's happened since the Second World War, and with the long-term after effect. What it was doing to our credibility, and our position--not just in the Arab states--but throughout the Third World was already evident to anybody who was thinking about it, and looking at it. And the intransigence of the Israelis was already fairly evident, although the Syrians were no better.

I remember the Jordan Waters plan; Eric Johnston was pushing that while I was there. And the Syrians led him down the garden path, and waited until the last minute, and then pulled the rug out from under him. So the Syrians were more responsible than any of the other Arabs, I think, for the fact that the Arabs always were missing the boat, playing catch up. They always agreed to meet a price that was no longer valid. In other words the Israelis are constantly upping the ante, and the Arabs are always playing catch up one step behind, and that's largely the fault of the Syrians, I think.

I'll say only one thing that...shortly before I left, in fact just before I left, there was a cocktail party some place and a particularly obnoxious young Syrian journalist came up and started haranguing me about why I was personally responsible as an American for planting "this cancer in the breast of the Arab nation". Well this cancer in the breast of the Arab nation theme was one that we'd all put up with over the years, and everybody was sick and tired of it. I could see all my colleagues from the embassy sort of looking at me and figuring, "Coon is about ready to blow. Let's enjoy it." And I did. I felt kind of a rushing sound in my ears, and I heard myself saying to my great surprise, "You people aren't ever going to get anyplace until you recognize that Israel is here to stay." And, of course, this was anathema, you didn't say this to Syrians. So immediately there was a hush in the room, and we squared off and this guy said, "Why? Why must we recognize that this blight, this Israel is here to stay?" And I heard myself saying, "It's here to stay because no one else is going to get rid of it for you, and you don't have the guts to do the job yourself." And everybody in the room just, "Oh." This guy turned to an Indian diplomat, and he said, "Did you hear what he said?" The Indian, an aristocrat of the old British school said, "Yes, and furthermore I think he's quite right" which devastated the guy. Because the Indians were on

their side, of course. The point apropos of your question is that everybody else in the embassy was glad that I'd done it. It vented things for a whole lot of them, and nobody ever spoke to me about it. I mean I got away without any particular censure.

Q: In this interview we try to go back somewhat in time to think about how we felt at the time. Was there any questioning of what were the American interests in the Middle East? I mean real interest. There was the obvious political one, which is the State of Israel, and the Friends of Israel in the United States. But as a professional Foreign Service group we're supposed to look at things and say, "What are our world interests." What do you think were our interests in the Middle East at the time? I'm talking about American interests, what we should be doing there.

COON: I wasn't very close to that side of it in the Consular Section, but of course I sat in on staff meetings. But again, memory fails. I don't remember the details, but two features loom in my mind in terms of the boiler-plate we were getting from Washington; what we were told were the American interests in the region.

The first, of course, was Israel, and its preservation; and the second was oil. I think those two themes have been fairly hardy perennials over the years. I think were I to answer this question with exact recall of where we stood in 1956 when I left, I think I would probably cite those two as dominating the US consensus as to where its interests lay. I think I felt then, I certainly have felt since, that that's a very distorted and essentially harmful way of looking at it. But still the hard nosed realist back in Washington is afraid of AIPAC (American Israeli Political Action Committee). So they don't want to say anything about Israel because they'll get gunned down if they do, like Percy was, the Senator from Illinois. So Israel is a sacred cow, and has been all along. You might say that the Israeli lobby has terrorized the rest of the policy establishment for forty years now, and very successfully.

And the other one, the oil interests, the hard nosed realists who accept Israel because they're afraid not to, will take oil as a sort of counter-balancing thing, and we've got to keep the oil flowing, and so forth.

Q: It tends to flow no matter what happens.

COON: Yes. I mean this is of "vital interest." In other words, America will die if the flow stops. It did, and we didn't.

Q: One further thing about the period as a snapshot of the times. What was our feeling about, "the Soviet menace" within the Middle East, particularly in Syria at that time?

COON: Oh, yes. John Foster Dulles came right on through and sat in the Ambassador's office and sort of conducted a staff meeting at one point, and the Cold War was very much with us. The Soviet's embassy was very much around and evident, and there was a great deal in cold war terms. I was there when the first Damascus International Fair opened and I was in charge of orchestrating the Country Team effort to report on every little tractor and piece of equipment that the East Bloc brought in because this was a magnificent opportunity to find out more about what the Soviets were doing.

You can date the economic cold war pretty much to the latter part of my tenure in Damascus. I think the Soviets' offer to build a steel plant in India was '56 or something like that, and '54-'55 they were just beginning to shed their sort of Stalinist conspiratorial attitudes toward the Third World and open up. And our initial reaction was one of intense suspicion and mistrust.

Q: Did we feel that Syria was ripe to be plucked by the Soviet bear?

COON: Well, those of us who were living there didn't feel that way. I think there was some feeling in Washington that the Syrians in effect had become crypto-Communist and had sold out to the Soviets. But I can come to that better later on when we get toward the end of the decade, and I was specializing in that.

ALFRED LEROY ATHERTON, JR.
Junior Second Secretary
Damascus (1953-1956)

Consul General
Aleppo (1956-1959)

Ambassador Alfred Leroy Atherton, Jr. was born in Pennsylvania in 1921. He received a A.B. and an M.A. from Harvard University. He entered the Foreign Service in 1946. In addition to Syria, Ambassador Atherton's Foreign Service career included tours in Germany, Egypt, and India, and many positions in Washington, DC involving Middle East affairs. Ambassador Atherton was interviewed by Dayton Mak in the summer of 1990.

ATHERTON: So I put down on my April Fool's card that I would like to go to the Middle East. We had to list three posts, and I listed Damascus, Beirut, and Amman, as I recall, and in due course was informed that in fact I was going to be transferred, after the mid-career course, to Damascus. Nobody thought of language training at all. By then Betty had come back and we had rented an apartment in Washington. I think the kids were staying with her parents. After finishing the mid-career course (by then I had orders to go to Damascus), I did take an area studies course at FSI. Two weeks, a month, I can't remember. It was not a very long course, but it gave a compressed survey of the Middle East, of the problems of the area, of the countries, and of the people. One of the principal lecturers was Ed Wright, whom many people remember as dominating the Middle East studies program in those days, at the FSI.

But there was no talk of taking time out to learn Arabic, at all. Betty said, "Well, one of us had got to know a little Arabic." She found a colleague who knew Arabic, because he had been brought up in Beirut and spoke Arabic until it was almost a second language, named Bill Stoltzfus. And Bill agreed that, in his spare time, he would give Betty some basic Arabic lessons. She also got the records (they weren't tapes in those days) out of the FSI language institute and began to do some self-study in Arabic. When the time came to go to Damascus, Betty had at least enough Arabic to handle servants and do shopping and things that you needed to do, but

with no knowledge of the written language at all. But she has a good ear for languages, and she had picked up enough spoken Arabic so she could manage to get by on a very elementary level.

I didn't even have that, and went off to Damascus with not one word of Arabic and only time to have begun, belatedly, to read as much as I could about the Middle East, the history mostly. Fortunately, in those days we traveled by ship, and we went out on one of the Four Aces, passenger freighter ships that took the better part of three weeks.

Q: Twenty-one days.

ATHERTON: I think they sailed from Hoboken, not from New York harbor, because they were freighters, basically, with about 100 passengers. Once they got across the Atlantic, they stopped at every port of call from Spain all across the Mediterranean.

Q: Beautiful ports.

ATHERTON: Beautiful ports. And we went ashore and enjoyed touring in all the ports, while having a free hotel room on the ship to come back to, so it was very cheap touring.

We had the kids with us, but there was a very nice Purser, and on some days he said, "You might not want to take the kids. Leave them on the ship and I'll take care of them. Go off and enjoy the tour." We often took up his offer, particularly for the youngest, Reed. By now this was January, not the best time of year. We sailed in January 1953 from Hoboken, and Reed had been born in August of '51, so he was only a year and a half old. He did not yet walk when we got on the ship. The Purser took care of him. Most of the time we took Lynne and Michael, who were by then eight and four years old, with us on most of the tours, but we did have a chance to do a lot of touring at the ports where we stopped.

Equally important, there was time to spend some of that three weeks reading up on the Middle East, so I would have some background by the time we got there. Not the language, but I did try to tackle a bit of history and a little bit about what the main issues of the day were--something called the Palestine problem and the Arab-Israeli conflict. There had been a war just a few years before.

Q: Really only one issue.

ATHERTON: And that was our introduction to the Middle East. We landed in Beirut. As I recall, it was not one of those sparkling days that one usually gets. This was winter; it wasn't one of Beirut's best beautiful days. We must have spent a night in Beirut.

What I remember most was the delay in getting off the ship, getting expedited through Customs and getting located. I guess we did get located temporarily in a hotel, not for long. But Reed, our youngest, who had not walked when we got on the ship, had learned to walk during that three weeks on shipboard. And it was very strange, because it was a rather rough crossing actually, in January, and Betty was in bed a lot of the time. She was not as good a sailor as Michael and I. But when we got off the ship in Beirut, Reed suddenly couldn't stand up, because he had learned

to walk on a moving deck and suddenly the deck wasn't moving. It was really quite amusing.

Anyway, we went to Damascus. I can't remember whether we went right straight to Damascus that day or whether we had another night in Beirut. But certainly we didn't tarry. We got across the mountains and across the Bekaa Valley and to Damascus in fairly short order. By then I guess it was February, because we had had a late January sailing from Hoboken, and it was February 1953 when we arrived on the scene in Damascus.

Q: Who was there?

ATHERTON: The Ambassador was James Moose. The DCM was Harlan Clark. The head of the Political Section was Bill Brewer. The number two in the Political Section, who eventually I phased-in behind and replaced, was Bill Eagleton. The Economic Counselor was Paul Geren. The Admin Officer was Bob Lindquist. The PAO was Grant Parr, the Press Officer Harris Peel.

Q: Pretty stolid group.

ATHERTON: In those days there was no government housing. We had to go on the market to find a place to live, with a housing allowance which was not overly generous. We were lodged temporarily in a boarding house on the Baghdad Road. It was run by a lady, I think Danish-born, who had married a Syrian named Antoun Saadeh. Her husband was a Syrian Christian who was very active in the PPS, the Partie Populaire Syrien, or the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, which was the Greater Syria Party. He had gotten on the wrong side of the ruling dictator of Syria and had to flee. I think he was in exile in Beirut. But Madame Saadeh had to run the boarding house. It had the advantage of being cheap, convenient, had fairly wholesome food, and was reasonably clean. I can't remember how long we were there. It seemed like a very long time, and it was the cold season. This was Damascus in the winter.

Q: Desert cold.

ATHERTON: Desert cold and no central heat. It was an old house, and all we had for heat were mazout stoves, fuel oil stoves which, if there was a strong downdraft, would backfire and send soot all over the room.

Q: What was your position?

ATHERTON: I went in as the junior Second Secretary in the Political Section. Bill Brewer was running it. I was told in my first meeting with the Ambassador that it was customary that the junior officer of the Political Section would also be his Protocol Officer, so I had better learn quickly about protocol. I didn't get a great deal of training. This was learning on the job. Sink or swim.

Q: They're pretty strict about that in Syria, the protocol.

ATHERTON: The protocol in those days was very strict. Ambassador Moose was a very old-school Ambassador. He did not really believe in giving buffet dinners. In Syria buffets were

the main kind of entertainment. He insisted that their dinners would be sit-down and black tie.

Q: In that beautiful garden in the back.

ATHERTON: In the good weather, in the beautiful garden. In the cooler weather, in the house. My duties as Protocol Officer meant that Betty and I were always on standby, because Syrians would accept invitations and then at the last minute they wouldn't come, and there would be a set table with a seating plan. Our job on these occasions was to be present at the residence in black tie and dinner dress when the party started, in case somebody didn't show. And it happened occasionally that we had to fill a place or two places at the table. This often involved after-dinner bridge, which was played for money. Betty and I had never played much bridge, so you can imagine how we lost money at these games.

Q: They had a few peculiar rules. It was known as Syrian bridge.

ATHERTON: Yes, it was not always our style of bridge. They also provided a poker table. I was somewhat better at that, because we had played poker in Stuttgart, and then when we first got to Damascus we had gotten into a poker circle, so we were better at poker than we were at bridge.

Q: How did you get along with all these people at the dinner parties there? These were the high government officials, were they?

ATHERTON: They were usually high government officials or people in the business community. It was before the Ba'ath revolution, before the nationalization program. Syria had a very active and a very aggressive and a very successful private sector, agricultural, commercial and industrial.

To go back a bit, one of Betty's and my first problems was to figure out what to do about languages. We spoke pretty good German by that time, but German was obviously not spoken in Syria, except by a small expatriate German community who, it turned out, had mostly been officers in the German Army during World War II. They were under contract to the Syrians as military advisors. It wasn't quite clear whether we should even have anything to do with them. Some of them might well have been Nazi, and we weren't supposed to have anything to do with Nazis in those days. There was a German Embassy, we could deal with them. But basically, except for the few Syrians who had made the transition from French to English as their second language, we didn't have a common language. And I clearly wasn't going to learn enough Arabic to be useful in the time available.

So I went to the Ambassador, in my first call on him, and said, "Mr. Ambassador, I know you're an Arabist, you've studied Arabic."

Although he, by the way, did not use it very much, he was very erudite. He could read and write classical Arabic. But I'm told by those who listened to him speak Arabic that he spoke it with a very strong Arkansas accent.

I said, "I have no Arabic at all. I can start taking intensive lessons, but it will probably take my

whole tour here before it gets to the point where it would be of much use. I could probably get my French, which I have studied, up to a useful level. I've never been in a French-speaking country, but I studied French in college, and I have a grounding in the grammar and vocabulary."

I could read it reasonably well, and I could probably find a tutor and get my French up to the point where I could use it as a working language. Most of the Syrians who had a single foreign language had had French, although increasingly many were also beginning to learn English.

And that's what I did. The Ambassador's advice was not to try to become an Arabist, an instant Arabist, which nobody can become, but to bring my French up to a working level as quickly as possible.

So I found a tutor. The problem, which wasn't a major problem, was that she happened to be Belgian rather than French, and therefore I'm told to this day that I speak French more with a Belgian than a French accent.

So I was launched. My job was basically doing whatever I was asked by the head of the Political Section and by the DCM, and obviously by the Ambassador, to do. Mostly it was keeping track of domestic political affairs.

A principal issue the Embassy dealt with involved liaison with the U.N. Truce Supervision Organization, problems in implementing the Syrian-Israeli General Armistice Agreement, the U.S. role in this when there were alleged violations of the armistice agreements. Other priorities were the regional relations between Syria and its neighbors, and obviously the main reason why we were there: the relations between Syria and the United States.

But basically my job was try to understand and interpret what was happening on the domestic political scene. And obviously to do this, I had to rely very heavily on one of the senior local employees, or Foreign Service national employees of the Embassy, who was head of our translation unit, but also came from a family that had certain status in Damascus and was well connected in the local community. He was a political analyst basically, and he was our man on the spot. Both Bill Brewer and I relied very heavily on this man, Fouad Ghamyan, and John Shammi, his number two, to make sure that we were not out of touch with things that were happening on the local scene and to help introduce us very often to the people on the political scene that we wanted to be in touch with.

Q: What was the government at the time, and were there opposing orientations?

ATHERTON: This was the period when Syria had experienced already three military coups d'état, as I recall. It was a military dictatorship. There were two traditional political parties whose leaders came from the old ruling class, the landowners, both agricultural and urban, the new industrialists to some extent.

But there was no traditional political life, except in coffee shops, and the salons, and the dinner parties, where the people whose political leadership roles had been usurped by the military coups talked a lot about how they were going to come back to power someday. These were the Adib

Shishakli years, the dictator at the time we arrived. They talked a lot about how they were going to restore parliamentary government. And Shishakli would every now and then remind them who was boss by rounding some of them up and sending them off to jail for awhile.

But it was all very civilized. They would go in and out of jail, and it was kind of a mark of honor. I remember one of these old politicians, whose name I've long since forgotten, complaining bitterly because there had just been a roundup of political opposition leaders and they had overlooked him. And he felt that this was a sign that they didn't recognize how important he was.

You know, looking back, I think some things are perhaps clearer than they were at the time. I was, I think, very fortunate to come to Syria and to the Middle East right at this time.

This was a time of transition. Having just come from Germany, which was also going through a period of transition of its own, we lived in exciting times. The Middle East, as a region, clearly was going through transition, part of the global transitions that happened in the wake of World War II, and to a large extent because of the restructuring that took place as a result of World War II. Remember, this was 1953. This was only five years after the declaration of Israeli independence, the establishment of Israel; four years after the conclusion of the General Armistice Agreements, which governed the relations between the Arab countries and Israel.

It was a very new situation. You had the Arab World still not accepting the permanence of Israel, and not really having psychologically recovered from the shock of having actually lost the war to these intruders in Palestine, and having to sign armistice agreements to stabilize the borders.

So this was a brand new factor on the scene, replacing the British control of Palestine. It was also a period when European influence, particularly British and French domination of the countries of the area, was phasing down very rapidly. Their influence, post-World War II, declined. The French had had the Mandate for Syria under the League of Nations between the two world wars, and the French had therefore been the dominant influence in Syria. But they were out. The British were out of Palestine. British influence was still there in Jordan and in Iraq, and the French influence in Lebanon was still strong. But basically you had the phasing down of the British, and in a way a kind of vacuum of external influence, which in the end the United States to some extent was looked upon to come in and fill. You also had a third area of transition. Internal political, or socio-political adjustments were going on within Arab societies at the time, with old elites being challenged in some of these countries by new political movements. Syria was in many ways the cauldron of a lot of this. Syria looked at itself as the guardian of the ideals of Arab nationalism, pan-Arab nationalism. It had taken on also the position of the defender of the Palestinian cause.

Well, in a way this was their image of the historical role Syria should play, even though they had just come out of two decades of being a Mandate under French control, and before that, five centuries of rule by the Ottomans. But remember that just before the First World War Arab nationalism had a renaissance, or maybe it was the first real birth of Arab nationalism, against the Ottomans at that time. And at the center of that was Damascus; Beirut to some extent, but Damascus to a very large extent. Therefore, there was the sense that they had led the struggle for

Arab nationalist aspirations and Arab independence. It was to Damascus that General Allenby came to mark the liberation of this area from the Turks. And it was to Damascus that King Faisal was supposed to come as the first king--one of the sons of the Sherif of Mecca, whose sons were to be rewarded for his having sided with the Allies against the Turks by being given pieces of the liberated and newly created independent Arab states.

It's no time, really, to go into the whole history of that, but, clearly, part of the turmoil was the Arab feeling of betrayal. And the Syrians felt it very strongly, that the Allies, the French and the British in particular, had let them down and not fulfilled their promise of independence after the First World War, and kept them under their domination all during the inter-war period. So this was a kind of a reaction to their resentment of British and French rule.

And after the establishment of Israel in Palestine, that resentment also transferred to some extent to the United States, because we were seen as one of the principal sponsors of Israel at the establishment of its independence. There was always a kind of a love/hate feeling about the United States. On the one hand, they had looked to us (and remembering Wilson and World War I and the post-war treaty negotiations) as the advocates of self-determination. They had really, I think, believed that the United States was somehow going to see that Arab aspirations for their own self-determination were fulfilled. What they saw instead was the establishment of Israel, on what they considered Arab land, with American support.

So we got off on less than a good foot with some of these new Arab regimes. Not so much the old elites, who really felt that their future lay in trying to have good relations with external powers. This was much the tradition. But the new military rulers who took over, and even more, the new political movements just beginning to take shape, tended to adopt a very nationalistic, in some ways xenophobic, anti-Western, including anti-U.S. ideology. It was very pan-Arab.

This was the time the Ba'ath Party was beginning to develop as the rather typically Syrian, or initially typically Syrian, version of Arab nationalism: a blending of Socialist economic doctrine and Arab nationalist political doctrine.

There had also been a revolution in Egypt the year before we got to Syria, 1952, and you had Nasser coming to power in Egypt, with his pan-Arab movement, his doctrine of Arab socialism.

So there was a lot of ferment, and it reflected itself in rivalries among the Arab states, between the traditional regimes and the nationalistic modernizing regimes. It reflected itself in the conflict between Israelis and Arabs. And it was a reflection of, in some ways, the growing Cold War. You had the Soviets trying to get a foothold in the area, or so it was perceived by the Eisenhower Administration. And during our time in Syria the Soviets made their big breakthrough by selling weapons to the Egyptians and to the Syrians, initially through the Czechs, but eventually, directly, when the U.S. declined to provide them arms against what they saw as an Israeli threat.

So I guess what I'm saying is that this period of our tour in Syria turned out to be an extraordinarily seminal time in terms of what became the trends of the future. A lot of things were just beginning to happen. I take no credit for recognizing it at the time. We were much too close to it, and much too focused on the Syrian scene. But now, looking back, it was a time when

a lot of future developments were taking shape, and the molds into which the area became frozen were established to a large extent--the Arab-Israeli conflict, which dominated almost everything most of the time.

Q: What sort of attitudes did you have in the Embassy toward all of this?

ATHERTON: That's a very interesting thing to reflect back on. I had come, obviously, with no particular involvement in the issues, the arguments, and the debates that eventually led to our recognition of Israel, the establishment of Israel. But the Ambassador, certainly, and some of the older hands very much belonged to that school which felt, as Loy Henderson had said at the time, that the establishment of Israel was going to destabilize the area, was going to offer opportunities for the Soviets to move in, that it would complicate our lives to the extent to which we, the United States, were seen to support Israel, and that we would be seen as hostile to, or at least not supportive of, Arab positions and the Arab cause.

So I think there was a kind of a polarization. My recollection is that the American Embassies in the area at that time in the Arab world tended to be advocates for the Arab points of view. And the other side of the coin was that the American Embassy in Tel Aviv tended very much to be an advocate of the Israeli point of view. And very often you wondered whether the war between the Arabs and the Israelis was any more intense than the war between Embassies Tel Aviv and Damascus, or Tel Aviv and Baghdad, or Tel Aviv and Amman.

I remember one of the revealing aspects of this happened when it was the turn of Embassy Damascus to host the periodic regional Chiefs of Mission conference. Ambassador Moose would be the host Ambassador, and the Ambassadors from all of the surrounding countries would come and meet, prepare their assessments of the situation, exchange views, and presumably make some recommendations for Washington about our policy in the area. The Ambassador from Israel was looked upon almost as an adversary, and his attitude was that he was entering the enemy camp. It came through very clearly. And I think it was reciprocated by the Ambassadors from the Arab countries.

Q: They thought he was a spy.

ATHERTON: So it was really very strange. I had to deal with this, as Protocol Officer. It fell to me to make sure that the right seating arrangements were made at the conference table, and the right pecking order was established so far as the official affairs were concerned. There were two problems. One was the tension between the Ambassador from Israel and most of the others. But there was another interesting sidelight to this, and I guess since they have both passed away, one can tell the story now.

Q: John Davies?

ATHERTON: No, the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time was George Wadsworth. The Ambassador at that time in Amman, I think, was Lester Mallory, who had come out of the commercial side.

And the question was: What is the rank order? What is the order of precedence of the American Ambassadors for seating purposes, for protocol purposes, and all these things? And I hadn't realized it, but apparently there was a longstanding rivalry of sorts between James Moose and George Wadsworth. And Moose, as the host, instructed me to draw up a rank order which would have had the effect of putting George Wadsworth, who was by far the most senior person in terms of his rank in-service, at the bottom of the list.

I said, "Well, how do we do this?"

And he said, "Well, you take the length of service in-country. Lester Mallory has served longer in Amman than George Wadsworth has in Saudi Arabia, and therefore he should be the senior visiting Ambassador."

I found this very difficult, but I didn't know quite how to handle it. My instinct told me it was a mistake, it would not work, and George Wadsworth would not put up with it. If you took the in-service ranks, he was by far the most senior of all the American Ambassadors at this conference. I think I enlisted the help of the DCM to persuade the Ambassador that this just wouldn't do. It wouldn't look right, it wouldn't be understood. And finally reason prevailed, and George Wadsworth was the ranking visiting Ambassador. But it was an interesting little insight.

Q: It would have been a little revolution in Syria.

ATHERTON: Well, there was a clear polarization of the area, not only between Arabs and Israelis.

Q: How did that affect your relations with the Syrian government, or did it?

ATHERTON: Well, not really, because, in a way, the Syrians didn't blame the people on the spot. They, I think, sensed that they had some friendly ears they could talk to. There was much internal intrigue going on within Syria. There were always groups plotting against each other. And then there was the concern about coups stimulated from Baghdad. Remember, the rivalry between Damascus and Baghdad is not a modern phenomenon; it's been there a long time. And the Iraqis were always being accused of trying to promote coups inspired by the British, who had strong influence over the Iraqi regime. Shishakli had overthrown an earlier regime, which was suspected of having come to power with the support of the Iraqis. The Iraqis in those days, by the way, were still the royalists. It was still the royal family, King Hussein's cousin Faisal, and it was also Nouri Said, the perennial Prime Minister who everybody assumed was a British agent. So this was seen as an Iraqi-British plot to try to overthrow the upstart military leader of Syria.

I think it has to be noted, by the way, that certainly one of the causes of this instability and of these coups d'état was the defeat of the Arab armies and the Arab regimes by Israel. It was a very big element, the attempts to discredit politically those who had been leading the Arab countries at the time of the first war with Israel in 1948, which led to the armistice agreements in '49. There were many leaders overthrown and assassinated, it wasn't just in Syria during that period. And one of the charges always was that they had been associated with the loss of Palestine. There may have been lots of other reasons why there were attempts to replace them, but that was

always a very powerful argument--that you, wherever you happened to be at the time, were involved somehow in The Defeat, which, incidentally, the Arabs then never really accepted as a defeat so much as a betrayal by somebody else. There was very little acceptance in the Arab mind and in Arab politics of Israel as a permanent part of the Middle East.

The armistice agreements of '49, which were supposed to be just transitions to peace treaties, quickly became the new status quo. Those were the days when the maps of the area didn't show Israel, they showed occupied Palestine.

I think it might be instructive to tell the story of my attempt to break with this tradition. In 1954, we'd been one year in Syria at the time, and I had certainly heard plenty of the Syrian and Arab point of view towards Israel and towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, not only within the Embassy, but from others in the diplomatic corps and certainly from the Syrians. And I just felt that there had to be two sides to this argument.

I should add, by the way, that we had a lot of contact with the U.N. observers. I think the head U.N. observer in those days in Syria was an American. The Chief of Staff of the U.N. Truce Supervisory Organization was a Canadian, but I think the top man, or if not the top man the number two man, at least, in Syria was American. We lived in the same building, so we had a lot to do with the U.N. people, and we used to get their perceptions of who was at fault for various incidents that became violations of the armistice agreements which had to be adjudicated. Their attitude was that the Israelis were very often responsible, by trying to occupy and cultivate the demilitarized zones. That was always one source of the problem, of Israel not only pushing towards the limits of what the armistice agreements allowed, but beyond the limits of what the armistice agreements gave them as rights under those agreements. So the atmosphere was pervasively one of sympathy, basically, with Syrians and the Arab cause, and criticism of the Israelis, which was totally different from the perception on the American political scene or from the Embassy in Israel.

But I felt that I had heard this side, and I wanted to get a sense of Israel and what the other side was. So I decided the way to do that was to take my local leave by making a trip to Israel. I went to the Ambassador and told him I would like to do this and thought I'd have to get his permission. His first reaction was really very negative.

He said, "You know, if you do that and the Syrians hear that you have spent your leave to visit Israel, they may declare you persona non grata. It may adversely affect your ability to do your job. But I won't interfere if you really want to do it. It's up to you."

So I decided I would. We left the children with the nursemaid and the neighbors to look after and drove down to Jordan and visited some friends in Amman, and then drove over to Jerusalem and stayed with Slator and April Blackiston; he was then Consul. They lived on the Arab side, since the Consulate General then was divided between the Arab and Israeli sides of the city.

We had made arrangements in advance, to save paperwork. This was all done in those days through the Consul General in Jerusalem, who was allowed to cross the line dividing the city, and the U.N. forces, to get permission for us to cross over and to take our car with us. The way

you did that was simply to take off your Syrian license plates and put on one of any number of American license plates (outdated license plates from the States) that the Consul General kept on hand for such occasions. So we put a couple of expired American license plates on the car, put the Syrian plates in the trunk, and, armed with our passports and our passes, drove through the Mandelbaum Gate in No Man's Land from Jordanian-occupied East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem, which was Israeli.

It was going from the Middle East to Europe in some ways, because what struck one is how European Israel was. The Israelis were mostly Europeans, German-speaking in many cases, which gave us the first chance in a long time to use our German. After going through the exercise of discovering that I didn't know Hebrew and they didn't know French or English, then we would say, reluctantly, why, I guess we have to speak German.

We spent the better part of a week, or maybe more, driving around much of Israel. We didn't get down into the Negev. We didn't get to Beersheba, but we went to Askelon near the Gaza Strip, to Galilee and Tel Aviv, and to Haifa. We had friends in the Embassy, by the way, in Tel Aviv, who showed us around. Steve Koczak who had been a colleague in Bonn, and his wife. When I was assigned to the office of Bernard Gufler, he was one of the people in that office. He was, by that time, Political Officer at the Embassy in Tel Aviv. So we had some insights and introductions to Israelis. I found it all very fascinating, and I heard, obviously, a lot of the other side of the story and saw what the Israelis were doing in terms of creating a state. One had to admire a great deal of what one saw.

We drove up the coast to Haifa. We had a Consulate in those days in Haifa, and we visited the Consul, whom we had known in Stuttgart. And then up to the crossing into Lebanon at Ras Naqurah. The Israeli border guards very obligingly helped us take the American plates off the car and wire the Syrian plates back on, and then we drove through that No Man's Land into Lebanon and up to Beirut. We drove, eventually, back across the border into Syria. We didn't, obviously, have any Israeli stamps on our passports. They were very careful to put any stamps on a separate laissez-passer so it wouldn't show on our passports that we had visited Israel. And back to Damascus.

The first night back, we went to a diplomatic reception, and at that reception was the Secretary General of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, Ibrahim Istuwari, whom we had first met when I was still in Germany. He was one of the people introduced by our British friend who had persuaded us that we ought to ask to be assigned to Damascus. So we knew him even before we arrived in Damascus. And he struck up a conversation. By the way, he was one of the few people whom I could speak German with in Damascus, because he had studied in Germany. So it was some German, some English, and some French. But I remember very well the conversation, though I can't remember any more which language it was in.

He asked, "Have you been away?"

And I said, "Yes, we have been on holiday."

"Oh," he said, "where did you go?"

I said, "Well, we went down to Jordan and to Jerusalem."

There was a long pause, and he looked at me and he said, "Did you cross over?"

And I figured they probably knew, that Syrian Intelligence probably knew, so I saw no sense in dissembling. And I said, "Yes, we did go across to visit Israel."

And his eyes lit up and he said, "Tell me, what's it like?"

And that was the only repercussion that we ever heard of our visit to Israel. It did not produce anything but curiosity on the part of the Syrians that knew about it. We didn't go around advertising it, but we didn't hide it. It certainly didn't cause our career to be foreshortened. In fact (I get ahead of my story a little bit), we had a second tour of duty in Syria, when we transferred from Damascus to Aleppo, and spent another happy two years there at the end of our Damascus tour.

Q: Could I ask you a question here? During your tour there in Damascus, what sort of problems did you personally have to take up with the Syrians, and who did you take them up with, the foreign office?

ATHERTON: I think we were pretty well limited in our official contacts to dealing with or through the Foreign Ministry. There was a very pervasive police-state atmosphere, no doubt about it. Syrian Intelligence was everywhere. The assumption was that you were under surveillance. Private Syrians, even those who were opposed to the government, were discreet, not about seeing us, but about what they talked about. So my contacts were either officially with the Foreign Ministry (usually at my level with the American Desk of the Foreign Ministry) or with private people in business, in the university, members of the old political, social, economic elite who were very circumspect about what they would talk about, about politics. Not entirely. Some were more willing to be outspoken than others.

But for the most part, to get really inside, non-governmental political information, for example about opposition movements, our main source, I have to admit, was our local employees, particularly those who were in the Political Section assigned to the press unit, who were very good, and very well connected. And they kept us, as it turned out in retrospect, very accurately informed of what was happening among the opposition, and particularly among the people who eventually became the founders of the Ba'ath Socialist Party. People like Michel Aflaq, Akram Hurani, who were in Syria or in exile at the time. I guess they were mostly in exile, some of them in Beirut. But they had their own followers, very strong, particularly in Ham. And most of the information that we got was either picked up by the local employees from them or, to some extent, by getting to know people in the press. For some reason, the press seemed a little more free to talk to us, or maybe they were a little more courageous. So we did have contacts with some representatives of the Syrian press. They were also sources with information.

But political reporting was pretty much based upon putting together the jigsaw puzzle. A little bit of information would come through a Syrian employee or from a Syrian friend in an unguarded

moment, or reading between the lines of the newspapers. We were not, I think, grossly off base, though there were many times when we didn't know inside details. For example, I don't know of anyone at the Embassy who had any advance knowledge of the coup d'état which, while we were in Damascus, overthrew Shishakli. But we knew in general there was growing discontent which was a threat to the regime.

There had been some student demonstrations against the regime. And I can remember once, as a good Political Officer should, going down to a demonstration outside Damascus University, going down in the car, trying to observe what was happening and get a sense of the discontent that this reflected, when the police moved in to break up the demonstration and began firing tear gas, and I ended up with tear gas in my eyes. The wind was blowing that way.

But we did try to keep our finger on the pulse by a lot of physical reconnaissance, going around asking ourselves: "Where has the Army got its tanks?" That was one of the things that was almost always a giveaway; if you knew where the Army was positioning its tanks, you knew where they thought the trouble was coming from.

Q: Did we have any military attachés?

ATHERTON: Oh, yes, we had military attachés, and they were doing their thing on the military side. We would obviously get together and compare notes. We would feed what we had into the Political Section, and the military attachés would feed what they had. And we had CIA representatives.

Q: Were they effective?

ATHERTON: Reasonably, I think, especially in gathering and in expanding the sources of information, helping analyze it.

The coup, which was successful, was mounted by a combination of military leaders, some members of the business community, and some of the older civilian politicians, taking advantage of general disenchantment with Shishakli, on the part, in particular, of the Druze community of Southern Syria. There had been armed clashes between some of the Druze communities in the south and the Syrian military, and Shishakli was blamed for having been too tough on the Druze. I can't even remember what it was that the Druze were expressing their opposition about, but it turned into some military clashes. And that, I think in retrospect, helped precipitate the consolidation of the opposition to Shishakli and the successful putting together of a military coup, which actually started in the north, in Aleppo, but quickly spread. Shishakli escaped and went into exile.

The civilian parliamentary government was restored. The old political parties returned to power. There were two principal parties: the Nationalist Party and the People's Party, which basically represented groupings of the principal leading Sunni Muslim families of Syria, the big landowners, the wealthy families. And also the parties represented, to some extent, the geographical centers of Syria. The People's Party was stronger in Aleppo. The Nationalist Party was stronger in Damascus. And the Ba'ath Party, which was an opposition party and had been

illegal up to that time, was strongest in Ham . So you had these regional groupings, plus family groupings, plus, in the case of the Ba'ath Party, an ideological grouping. The Ba'ath Party opposed the old ruling elite, the old politicians. Its leaders represented a new class of younger Syrians who were secularist and pan-Arabist in their politics, Socialist, and, in some cases, Marxist in their economics.

Q: Who does that leave? Who was with Shishakli?

ATHERTON: Shishakli, at that point, had nobody left. Shishakli had had the military. He did not really have a political base, which was one of the problems. His base was only in the army, and not the whole army. That was one of his weaknesses. He never really did build a strong grassroots base of support. He had certain military units and officers in key positions who were loyal to him. When they began to defect, he had nobody to turn to. The streets did not pour out to defend Shishakli.

It was a very interesting coup. We watched it all from the balcony of our apartment. Tracer bullets in the air. None of the foreigners ever had a sense of being in danger during this period. It was like watching a show from one of the best seats in the house without feeling that you were in any way really part of it. There were curfews, and we had to stay indoors nights for awhile, but no great inconveniences.

And then came the restoration of civilian government, the old President and parliament. Basically, the civilian leaders took over from the coup leaders, with the coup leaders' approval. In fact, the coup leaders reinstalled the civilian government. Their position was that this was simply a continuation of the legitimate government which had been interrupted by the series of coups d'état, and they simply reconvened the parliament, which had existed before the coups had dissolved it. And Hashim al-Atasi, the old President from Homs, was reinstalled as President.

It was in a way turning the clock back, as though nothing had happened in those intervening years. Back to business as usual. The problem with business as usual in Syria was that the old parties were more preoccupied with their rivalries among themselves, and they were rivalries that had very little to do with political differences. They mostly had to do with family rivalries or with regional differences, economic differences, political influence.

It seemed to many of us that they were turning back the clock, but were unaware of the world around them, of the new forces that were coming to the surface from other sources, from other causes. The new pan-Nationalist, pan-Arab forces in the area and in Syria. The growth of the strength of the Ba'ath Party. And also there was growing, in parallel with this, a Syrian Communist Party. So you had the Ba'ath, who were Socialist and, in some respects, Marxist economically, and also pan-Arab, pan-Nationalist, and anti-Communist. And you had the Communists, who looked to Moscow and were therefore not considered good nationalists. And then you had the old political parties who actually constituted the government. They held the parliament, they held the presidency, the prime ministry and all of that. But the world was moving on, and they were not keeping up with it.

By the way, there was one little incident which I think is worth reporting, even though I'm

backing up a bit. Immediately after Shishakli had been overthrown, it wasn't quite clear yet who was going to be in charge and who the new government was going to be; we didn't know yet whether there was a government to recognize. Did we or did we not have diplomatic relations at that point?

As the junior person in the Embassy Political Section, I was sent down to test the waters at the Foreign Ministry, and the person I went to see was the Chief of Protocol. It was felt that he was one contact that we could have. So I went and called on the Chief of Protocol, who was a member of an old family of Syria, Walid Majid, who eventually ended up in exile and became a U.S. citizen after the revolutions threw his class out of power. But he was the Chief of Protocol, and I went into his office.

This was just literally a day or so after Shishakli had been overthrown. And the first thing I noticed was that over his desk, where there had always hung a picture of Shishakli as long as I'd been there, was a picture of Hashim al-Atasi, the man who had been President before and who was coming back.

I looked up and I said, "Walid, what happened to Shishakli? You've already got old Hashim al-Atasi's picture up there."

He laughed, and pointed to a storage area in the wall. He said, "Oh, we keep them all up there, because they come and go."

They had no trouble finding a portrait of Hashim al-Atasi and rehanging it, as though nothing had happened in the intervening years.

There was a formal arrival parade, and I can remember going downtown with Fouad Ghamyan to watch the procession from Homs as the new President and all of his supporters, in good Arab fashion, were dancing, clapping, and cheering, supporters lining the streets. One of them said something to Fouad in Arabic, and Fouad laughed and turned to me and said, "Do you know what that man said?"

I said, "No."

He said, "We cheer them when they come, and we curse them when they go."

All the pictures of Shishakli had disappeared from all the stores, and pictures of Atasi had suddenly reappeared from nowhere.

Syria was back to the parliamentary government that had existed briefly after the French departure, after Syria had been given independence, and before the series of military coups began.

It was during this period, however, that the real source of political action and political power increasingly shifted to the younger officers in the military, who were in very large numbers adhering to the new political forces, in particular to the Ba'ath Party.

We did not have contacts with the military directly, but with people who were in turn in touch with the military. The military really, except for the formal contacts between the Defense Attaché and their counterparts, had very little direct contacts with foreigners. There were one or two exceptions, and the one or two exceptions usually got into trouble.

But we did put together, I think, a pretty good picture that the real training ground for political indoctrination of this new breed of ideological, pan-Arab, anti-imperialist, and, to some extent, anti-Western officers in the Syrian army was the Homs Military Academy. There had been some officers on the faculty of the academy who were converted to the ideology of the Ba'ath Party. Mostly, it was a reaction to the failures they saw of the old regime, its association with the old socio-economic-political order, and with the West. They were very idealistic, and they saw the old regime as having learned nothing, having lost Palestine, having lost the war with the Israelis, holding on to political power and the wealth of the land and the large agricultural estates.

Q: Were they primarily of one religious faith?

ATHERTON: These were almost entirely Sunni Muslim. That is, the old elite was Sunni Muslim plus a few wealthy Christian families, like the Homsis of Aleppo, for example. Those who were coming up in the ranks of the military, opposing them, tended to belong to the non-Sunni Muslim minority, though there were some Sunni officers among them. And that's where the Alawites began to get a foothold. The Alawites are a minority heretical sect of Islam that was now mostly located around Latakia up in the north in the mountains, who had always been on the outs in Syrian political and economic life and who were really considered second-class citizens in many respects.

I can remember that the young girls, what we would call child labor, who used to be hired out to the wealthy families in Damascus and Aleppo to work in their households, were usually young Alawite girls who were, in many cases I think, indentured servants. They were in effect sold to work for these wealthy families in return for payments to their parents.

During the period of the Mandate, the military academy had been run by the French. And French policy, as all good colonialists have always done over the years, I suppose, was divide and conquer.

They tended to give advantages to the minority Alawites and Christians, as a counterweight to the majority Sunnis who produced the nationalist leaders and were considered unreliable and anti-French. So they tended to get more spaces in the military academy. You began to get a whole generation of young Alawite and, in some cases, Christian and a few Sunni officers coming out of the military academy, indoctrinated in the ideology of the Ba'ath Party, which was really a revolutionary ideology. Basically, their goal was a social, political, economic revolution. It would throw out the old class, and nationalize the big estates, nationalize industry, nationalize the banks and all of the sources of wealth in the country. It would lead a pan-Arab movement that would submerge national differences. They viewed, in many respects, the political entities of the time as artificial, including Syria, whose boundaries were the result of the division of the area between the British and French after World War I.

Q: Would you say that they were pro-Nasser at this point?

ATHERTON: Many of them had become followers of Nasser. Many of the younger officers looked to Nasser as the model. He was going to lead the Arab world into a new renaissance. Though I'm no Arabist, I did learn very quickly that the correct rendering of Ba'ath Party into English was Arab Socialist Renaissance Party. It spoke of a rebirth. It wasn't something new, it was a rebirth of Arabism, of the pan-Arab nationalist movement or, some would say, myth. Nevertheless, people believed in this thought that Syria was the natural focal point for a rebirth of Arab nationalism.

I have to say, at this point, that while these fascinating changes were taking place, and revolution was under the surface with an increasingly politicized military exercising influence behind the scenes, on the surface, life was quite normal, quite enjoyable and quite stable. The new regime, even though they were very opposed to American Middle East policy, was friendly to individual Americans, and so we had lots of good Syrian friends. It was not politically dangerous at the time to deal with Americans, so we could see our Syrian friends, they could see us, we could go to each others' homes, and go on family picnics together. And we really did develop quite a group of friends. Particularly, increasingly, English-speaking people, some in government, some in the Foreign Ministry, but many of them in business, many of them in the professions: lawyers, doctors, professors at the university.

It was a time of some opening up of things in Syria. It had been a very closed kind of society. There was even opposition press, there were opposition statements in the parliament, and lots of ferment going on. A very exciting time to be there, not only in terms of what was happening in Syria, but in terms of what was happening in the region. In the backdrop all the time, of course, was the Palestine conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, recurrent crises along the armistice lines, but never getting out of hand.

By that time, 1956 was approaching. We had gone to Syria in early '53, so we had had three years and a little more in Syria, and clearly were due for home leave and probably a transfer. I was, as we all did in those days, looking around the world to see where do we go next (Is it maybe time to think about heading back to Europe, which is where I thought I was going to spend the rest of my career?) when the decision was made in Washington to accept the recommendation from the Embassy in Damascus that the time had come to open a Consulate in northern Syria, in Aleppo. Aleppo was considered sufficiently important commercially and politically (that's where the coup against Shishakli had started), that we ought to have permanent representation there. We had had, always, a practice of sending an officer from the Embassy in Damascus for a few days each month to Aleppo, because there was so much consular business at Aleppo.

Q: What type?

ATHERTON: Visas, mostly. A lot of applicants for immigration visas, applicants for visitors' visas. Aleppo was in some ways a more Westernized city than Damascus. People don't often think of it this way, but they were, in those days, about the same size and population. They were

both maybe half of million--four hundred and fifty thousand, five hundred thousand inhabitants in Damascus, and about the same number in Aleppo.

Syria as a whole is predominantly Muslim and predominantly Sunni Muslim (I think the overall population of Syria was then perhaps 15 percent Christian), there was still, though you rarely met them and they weren't talked about, a small Jewish community which remained after most Syrian Jews had left and gone to Palestine, or to Israel after it was established, or to the United States. Many had left because they had felt unsafe in Syria after the establishment of the state of Israel. But Aleppo was then about 35 percent Christian, both Syrian Christian and also a very large Armenian Christian population.

Aleppo is where many Armenians, who were driven out of Turkey in the 1920s in what to this day the Armenians say was genocide, before the word was invented, ended up and put down roots. Many became very prominent, mostly in the business community, and running what was then the biggest hotel. Baron Hotel in Aleppo was run by an Armenian family named Mazlounian. Armenians were also prominent in the medical profession, the legal profession, as well as in business, but not in politics and government. Politics in the Armenian community were Armenian politics, between the two parties that had traditionally striven for control of Armenian politics. They just carried their politics over into exile.

There was enough consular business in Aleppo, particularly among the Armenians, who had many relatives in the States, wanting to immigrate, or get visitors or student visas to the States, to justify having somebody go up and interview applicants in Aleppo. We screened out many, and did a lot of preliminary processing there, so that when applicants were ready for the final visa issuance, they would have to make just one trip to Damascus and get the final papers.

That was a very coveted assignment, and there were several of us who were rotated doing the monthly, three-day or so consular trip to Aleppo. It was always considered a good opportunity, not only to get out of Damascus (Aleppo had, in some ways, better restaurants than Damascus), but it was a different mood, a different flavor. It was also a chance to put one's finger a bit on the political pulse in Aleppo and try to get some sense of what the currents were up there, the attitudes towards Damascus, towards the government. Aleppo always had a very suspicious view of Damascus. If there were to be opposition and threats to the government, this might be where they would germinate. So there was a lot to be done. At Aleppo, we could talk more freely. We could usually get pretty good bits and pieces of political intelligence, political information.

Q: Is this the type of city where everyone talks politics?

ATHERTON: Yes, everyone talks politics. Even the Christians, who in Damascus tended to try to stay out of politics because they were so overwhelmed and outnumbered. Some of them were very wealthy and doing very well, but they were largely excluded from politics by the large Sunni majority. Not so much in Aleppo. They were more politically active and politically engaged themselves.

There was a large consular corps in Aleppo, a few career consuls, including British and French, but most were honorary consuls. They were Syrians, mostly Christian, who had been named Consul by those countries to represent their interests. A few were nationals of the country they

represented, but not career Consuls, permanent residents of Aleppo. So it was a very lively sort of social life.

There was also an American community, a very compact little American community, because of Aleppo College. Aleppo College was an American-run secondary school, which had been there, originally started by missionaries, and still very much related to the Congregational Church, but not proselytizing; it was an educational institution. They were well wired into the local political scene, so we could always go up there and talk with Americans at the College and get a sense of what was going on: What were the issues? What were the subjects? Who was doing what to whom? Who was trying to replace whom in what position? What were the attitudes towards Damascus and towards the government? Some good political reporting came out of these trips to Aleppo.

So when the word came that Ambassador Moose's recommendation had been accepted that we should open a Consulate in Aleppo, Betty and I had a consultation, and I said I would like to ask for that job. I'd like to be the first Consul at Aleppo, even though it would mean an extended tour in Syria. We had already been three years in Damascus, and therefore it would presumably be at least two more years. But we liked Syria, we were enjoying it, it was an exciting time. Lots of things were happening in the region that involved Syria. So I put my name in the hat, and I was chosen.

Now at just about that same time, when I heard that I was going to be named Consul at Aleppo and given the job of opening the Consulate General there, I was also approached by my old boss from Bonn days, Bernard Gufler, who, incidentally, had been an inspector in between and had come through Syria and inspected us at one point, so we had reestablished contact.

He had been named the new head of the U.S. Mission in Berlin, and he asked if I would like to come and join his staff.

That was a very tough choice, because I had always thought Germany was where I wanted to return. I was confident that it was the one place where my language would stand me in very good stead. And I liked Bernard Gufler. I admired him, and I had enjoyed working for him, and Berlin would be an exciting assignment. On the other hand, I would have been one of a large mission.

At Aleppo, I was going to be in charge. I was going to be Numero Uno. I was going to open the Consulate General. And I would have a staff, at least initially, of one Vice Consul; one American all-purpose Secretary; a junior American staff assistant to do the administrative work; and a small Foreign Service national staff, a couple of whom were transferred to Aleppo from Damascus. They had come originally from Aleppo and were glad to go back and work in Aleppo.

So I started out with an experienced local staff. I subsequently hired several people locally, recommended by Aleppo College, some Aleppo College graduates. One was a sort of all-purpose contact person. He came with less than fluent written English, but he knew that city, and he knew everybody in the city. He was the kind of person you needed if you were going to get anything done in Aleppo. The other was an interpreter/translator. There were also a couple of drivers and

visa clerks. The chief Foreign Service National visa clerk was transferred from Damascus to Aleppo. So we started off with a staff that pretty well knew what they were doing.

Again, I'm getting a bit ahead of the story. My job, obviously, in the first instance, was to find a piece of property. We didn't own any property in Aleppo. We didn't have any place to set up shop.

Well, before going to Aleppo, I went off on home leave, in the summer of 1956. My father had just died, and I was going back to the States to see my mother and help her pack up to join us and become part of our family. When we came back to Syria, she came back with us.

But, of course, the summer of '56 was also when the rumblings were getting louder of what became the Suez Crisis and the Suez War. By the time home leave was over and we were ready to go back to Damascus as a base from which to go up and open the Consulate General in Aleppo, concern about possible war was growing. Tensions were high between Israel and Egypt and Jordan. Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal Company, and the British and French were threatening Egypt.

Basically, what this meant for us personally was that the decision was made not to permit families to return to Syria because of the unstable situation. So when the time came for us to go back, in September I guess it was, the orders did not include my family. Betty and our two sons and my mother, who had by then joined our household, had to stay in the States until the Department approved travel for families back to the area. The anomaly was that our daughter could go, because she was going to boarding school in Beirut, and Lebanon was considered stable. So our daughter and I went back, I put her in the American Community School in Beirut and went on to Damascus.

By that time, this was already October, and it was quite obvious that the area was moving more and more towards crisis. There were plenty of intelligence reports of the movement of British troops to Cyprus and the mounting of an invasion capacity. There were reports of mobilization in Israel. But still nobody knew whether it was going to be brinkmanship or whether there would really be a war. However, the signals were by then serious enough that we had evacuated Embassy families from Syria.

I was sent to Aleppo from Damascus with a double mission. One, to get in touch with the American community in northern Syria and say that their government advised them to evacuate to a safer place, since it looked like there would be a war. And, secondly, while there, I was to look for property for the Consulate General. The right hand and the left hand in Washington obviously hadn't coordinated too well.

And I did look. I went and looked at a number of properties. I set up, by the way, temporarily, in the Hotel Baron, as a place from which to work until I could find space. I did in fact identify a very nice new apartment building in which we could have two floors. One whole floor would be our residence, and the ground floor would be half office and half apartment for the Vice Consul. We in fact got lawyers and drew up a draft lease, which I took back to Damascus to get approved.

I had, by that time, notified all of the Americans at Aleppo College. And I had been able to reach by telephone some missionaries in northeastern Syria and give them the warning. I must admit that most of them didn't heed the warning. But we were not ordering them to evacuate, just advising them. Some of the families left, but, for the most part, they said: We'll stick it out.

Q: Were they going to Beirut?

ATHERTON: Yes, Beirut was the safe-haven. All of the American Embassy families in Syria were evacuated to Beirut. I was living with Bob Strong at the time. He was the DCM then, and he was also the Chargé, because we, at that point, were between Ambassadors. I can remember many poker games in the evenings, because there were blackouts by that time. We had to cover all the windows and keep the light in. We couldn't go out, there wasn't much to do, so we had a very active poker circle. Just waiting to see what would happen. On the way back to Damascus from Aleppo, having drawn up the lease and talked to the Americans about leaving, we stopped, as we always did on that trip, in Homs, where there was a very nice restaurant (it was about the halfway point) to have a coffee break and a bite of food. The radio was blaring away. I was with Hussam Malandi, who was our interpreter/translator and political assistant, who had been with me and was going to be with me at the Consulate in Aleppo when it opened. Everybody in the room suddenly stopped talking, but the radio kept on going, and I turned to Hussam and said, "Come on, give me a translation, what's happening?"

He said, "The Israelis have invaded Egypt. The Israelis have attacked the Egyptians. The British and French have issued an ultimatum that they have to disengage or the British and French will come in and separate the parties."

It was October 29, 1956, and that was the beginning of the Suez War, while I was sitting in a coffee shop in Homs.

Well, I went back to Damascus and simply went through a period of waiting for the war to be over. Syrian relations were broken with the British and the French. I can remember having a farewell dinner in one of the hotels with my British and French colleagues. Our British colleague in Damascus was about as indiscreetly critical of his government's policy as it's possible for a British diplomat to be.

Q: Many of them were.

ATHERTON: Yes, many of them were. And then it was just a case of waiting. I went back to Aleppo and set up quarters in the Hotel Baron. Had a room where I slept, and they gave me one of the small rooms off the lobby as an office. I hadn't officially opened the Consulate General, but I was a presence there, and people knew this was the beginning of the American Consulate. And I began, while the war was going on, getting my contacts established, meeting my colleagues in the consular corps, and just generally beginning to settle in, getting the property in shape, getting furniture, getting ready so we could move in. It took a long time. That was October. We finally were able to have the official opening planned for the second of January, 1957. But in an informal way I had already been there for some time. Let me add a little footnote

about one of the dilemmas of that time.

American families had all been evacuated with, I might say, very generous per diem allowances. They were all living very well, staying at the best hotels in Beirut, certainly not hurting financially, as they had evacuation allowances. My family, because they had not left the U.S., were not evacuated and therefore didn't get any of these allowances except a pittance of a separation allowance.

Betty said, "Two hundred and fifty dollars a month for your family to live on!" Betty and two sons and my mother. Well, Mother had friends to stay with. Betty and the boys moved in with her folks. She went to work teaching school as a substitute teacher, and managed somehow to hold body and soul together while I went happily about the business of getting the Consulate General operating in Aleppo.

The big question was what to do with our daughter. The American Community School in Beirut was closing down for Christmas holidays, and the boarding department was closing. We didn't have anybody I could ask to take her in, in Beirut.

The other person in the same situation was Ambassador Moose, whose daughter was also in the American Community School in Beirut.

So he and I had a pact. He said, "We won't tell anybody, we'll just bring our daughters back to Syria for the Christmas holidays." So his daughter went back to Damascus, and our daughter then came to Aleppo.

We had an official reception, opening the Consulate General in Aleppo on the Second of January 1957. And, in the absence of Betty, our daughter, Lynne, age thirteen, was my hostess. Ambassador and Mrs. Moose came up, and we had a receiving line with the Ambassador and Mrs. Moose, myself, and Lynne.

Q: Wasn't that a rather good period with the Arabs, too?

ATHERTON: Because of our policy, we took a very strong position in opposition to the Israelis, to the French, to the British, and we were in very good graces. The Syrians loved us for awhile. They all came to our parties, they accepted our invitations, they invited us out. It was really a very heady experience. It was a good time to get acquainted. I had the interesting job of having to get an office running, but also of getting a household running, and hiring servants, and getting a cook, and getting a butler, and being, you know, just part of the social life. And Aleppo had a very busy social life.

The big question, of course, was how soon we'd be able to get the family back together. You may recall that, even though the war was over, we were still in a Cold War to some extent with the Israelis, trying to get them to withdraw from Sinai. The British and French had withdrawn, or made commitments to withdraw, but the Israelis were hanging on, and there was a bit of pressure exerted from John Foster Dulles and the Eisenhower Administration. And one element of that was creating the impression that this was still a somewhat unstable situation by not removing the

restriction on families returning to the area. So our family and the families in Beirut were all caught up as sort of pawns in this power game.

Until finally, sometime in the spring, sometime maybe in March as I recall, I was able to get permission for Betty and the two boys and my mother to come as far as Beirut. I said, "After all, our daughter is already in Beirut." And so the Department in its wisdom agreed that they could come as far as Beirut. And that's what happened, they came and spent awhile in Beirut, staying in the least expensive hotel as we could find--Lords Hotel down on the water. It was a nice location.

Then, eventually, within a couple of weeks, the ban was lifted, and finally I was able to bring my family to Aleppo, sometime around April I guess it was, when I was already four months into my tour. And we settled down to a very happy tour of duty in Aleppo, which was punctuated by just enough excitement to keep it from being dull.

One of the excitements, of course, in 1958 was the revolution in Lebanon. The attempt was attributed to Nasser's inspiration, though I think a lot of the blame, in retrospect, obviously also went to the President of Lebanon, Chamoun, for trying to prolong unconstitutionally his period in office. But in any case, everyone knows very well that the perception of Washington was that this was an attempt to overthrow the legitimate government of Lebanon by forces sponsored by Nasser, and somehow encouraged by the Russians, and, therefore, suspected of being part of a Communist international conspiracy.

I should add, by the way, that the honeymoon by then had worn off. We had won a lot of credit with the Arabs for opposition at the time of Suez. It was perceived to be in support of Nasser, but it really was not so much in support of Nasser as to prevent the Russians from having a field day by getting all the credit for opposing the Israeli, British and French invasion. But it didn't last long, because we declared, not too long after that, what became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine. We encouraged all of the states in the region to let bygones be bygones and join in a common defense against the Soviet and Communist threat to the area.

It seemed, to those of us looking at it from where we sat, totally unrealistic and out of touch with the mood of the times. We were telling the Arabs, in effect: Your enemies are the Russians, who have just come to your support during the Suez Crisis. Your friends are those who have just attacked you. And so it was a non-starter, an attempt to organize the area in Cold War terms.

But it did have one effect, which was to put an end to the honeymoon between the Arabs and the United States. We were seen again as the imperialist trying to get the Arabs to abandon Palestine and accept Israel, join with the Israelis and build a defense front, which started out being the Baghdad Pact. In July of '58, when that government of Iraq was overthrown and Iraq was out of the Baghdad Pact, it became the Northern Tier, and eventually CENTO, the Central Treaty Organization, with Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, but without the Iraqi member.

In any case, the revolution in Beirut provided a certain amount of excitement. There was, as you may remember, a lot of suspicion that the Syrians were sending reinforcements across what was then an open border, between northern Lebanon and northern Syria, to reinforce the forces that

were fighting the Chamoun government. One of our jobs in Aleppo, because the Consulate General was located right near the road that led out of Aleppo towards the west, was to observe the convoys moving out. And we were able to report evidence of Syrian military troops heading in the general direction of Lebanon. Now, how far they went and what they did when they got there, we couldn't say. But we could certainly confirm that there were Syrian reinforcements moving towards the Bekaa Valley and the Tripoli area of northern Lebanon, which were areas of Lebanon with large Muslim populations sympathetic with the forces opposing Chamoun.

Of course, this also was the time of the revolution in Iraq, in July of that year. That was what really, I think, led the Administration to see the hand of a major Soviet Communist conspiracy. A revolution in Iraq and a fight against the legitimate government in Lebanon led to the perception in Washington that they were all somehow guided from Moscow, which, in retrospect, I think was nonsense.

But that was the perception, and it led to the decision that to stem the revolutionary tide we should send in the fleet, send in the Marines, and that was the great Marine landing on the beaches of Beirut in July, 1958.

There were repercussions in Aleppo, which is a little piece of history but rather interesting. Immediately, mobs began to form down in the city to march on the American Consulate to protest the U.S. invasion of their sister state, thus opposing the march of the Arab nationalist revolution led by Egypt's Nasser.

Q: That's when you wished your apartment wasn't in the same building.

ATHERTON: As the office. Exactly. I sent the Vice Consul, who was then Art Lowrie, down to talk to the Chief of Police and say that we had received a message that we should alert the local authorities that U.S. troops would be landing in Lebanon. By the time we got the message and could deliver it, the news was already on the radio that this was happening, but I did send the Vice Consul down to carry out the instructions, but mostly to say that we presumed we would get protection in case there was a mob reaction.

And his reaction was: "What are you doing in Lebanon at all? That's not your country. It is our country." It was not a very friendly reaction.

But deeds were what we wanted. They did call out police reinforcements, and they blocked any mob attempts to reach the Consulate. The mob had really two objectives: the Consulate and Aleppo College, which were seen as an American entity in Aleppo. And the police protected us, they did their duty, and we didn't have to evacuate, though we were getting ready to evacuate. We were putting together evacuation kits, getting out the evacuation plans, and deciding which way we'd go and where we'd go if we had to leave. But we didn't.

Then we went into a period of deep freeze, when our Syrian friends were afraid to talk to us, and the official Syrian position was rather hostile. Though some Syrian friends would talk privately and tell us, if they had a chance to see us privately, that they really agreed with what we had done. These were usually Christian Syrian friends, who thought what we were doing was fine.

Another interesting footnote of all this was that we had with us as house guests, when all this was happening, Colonel Bill Eddy and his wife. He, of course, had been a Marine officer, and had been the U.S. Minister in Saudi Arabia, and was then the Tapline (Trans Arabian Pipeline) representative in Beirut, as I recall. They had come over to stay with us and were trapped, because all of a sudden the invasion happened, the border was closed, there was no way to get back to Lebanon. So we had this ex-Marine officer chomping at the bit to get back to Beirut where the action was, and he was stuck in Aleppo with the Athertons. There was nothing to do but wait for the border to open. Eventually it did, and eventually he got back to Beirut.

Then came the period of the phony war between Syria and Turkey. There were reports that the Turks were mobilizing troops on the northern border of Syria. Again, to a large extent, concocted reports, but they were part of the Syrian government's attempt to whip up internal solidarity. The Turks, after all, were part of the Central Treaty Organization, and allies of the United States, and were seen as threats. They were a good whipping boy for the Syrians. We rode this out. Most of our Syrian friends didn't have much to do with us, so we went on picnics. We sensed no personal hostility, it was just that the word had gone out: Don't be seen with the Americans.

I can remember the Turkish Consul General having his National Day party in the middle of all of this, and the only Syrian official that showed up was the Governor, who came and put in his obligatory ten minutes and left, and one very courageous private Syrian, Edmund Homsî, head of one of the big Christian families of Aleppo, who thought this was all nonsense, and he came to show he wasn't going to be intimidated.

It was a roller coaster period in our relationship with the Syrians. It was up and down and up and down. And it was almost turned off and on with a switch, depending on what the word from the Syrian secret police was at the time to the people: This is a time to not see Americans; this is a time to see Americans. But, again, it was never unpleasant, it was just a bit lonely. We certainly didn't have any feeling of personal danger in all this. The Syrians were very proper about maintaining the security of the Consulate and maintaining law and order.

The end of our tour in Aleppo coincided with the resurgence of some internal stresses and instabilities, including within the military, and a growing concern in the Ba'ath Party, which was by then becoming a major political force in the country and the military, even though they had not yet taken over the government. And there was a threat from the Communists, who were also trying to achieve a position of power. The Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army at that time was widely believed to be a Communist and a Soviet agent. The concern became so great that the Syrians, including the Ba'ath, called upon Nasser to rescue them. This was a Syrian initiative calling for Egypt to join with Syria and establish what became the United Arab Republic.

I had actually had a preview of this and reported it to Damascus. At a dinner in the home of a Syrian landowner family, the Hassan Jabris, I met their daughter's fiancé, a pro-Ba'ath army officer, Lt. Jlas, who predicted it--the same Jlas who is now Syrian Minister of Defense.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, toward the end of the last tape, you had been telling us about your experiences in Syria. First, your assignments to Damascus and, later on, your assignment to Aleppo. Now I wonder if you would tell us what happened after that.

ATHERTON: The union of Egypt and Syria, which took place towards the end of my tour in Aleppo, meant that we didn't have an Embassy in Syria any more. The Embassy in Damascus became another Consulate General, just like Aleppo, and our Embassy was in Cairo. We were constituent posts of the American Embassy in Cairo, which was the capital of the United Arab Republic of Syria and Egypt. And our Ambassador was Ray Hare, because it was his time as Ambassador in Egypt.

Q: Did you yourself move to Damascus?

ATHERTON: No, no, we continued. We functioned as though nothing had changed. We were a Consulate anyway, and we were simply a provincial city of Syria, and we then became a provincial city of the Syrian Province of the United Arab Republic. But in terms of our functions and our responsibilities, we continued to do the normal consular reporting, consular work, in our consular district.

There was one difference, of course. There was suddenly an Egyptian presence in Syria which had not been there before, including a very senior military man who was assigned to the military command in northern Syria, a very cultured and delightful Egyptian of the old school, whom we got to know rather well. And subsequently, in fact, on one of our trips to Egypt, I remember visiting him in Giza.

Q: Who was he?

ATHERTON: His name, I still remember, was Colonel Niazi. I can't remember the first name, but the family name was Niazi. Our circle of acquaintances broadened, obviously, to include Egyptians for the first time in the social circles of Aleppo.

Though I must say the Aleppans tended to be a little less than enamored of the way in which the Egyptians seemed to take over. The Egyptians did tend to be a little heavy-handed, and it was not quite clear sometimes whether they were there as invited partners in this republic or as the new rulers. Some of them acted more like the new rulers.

But I do remember, before I move on to the next phase, one rather interesting episode that occurred right after the union. You may recall that Syria's pride had to be taken into account. It was clear that Egypt was going to be the dominant partner in this union, and yet the Syrians felt very much that they were the initiators of the union. They had done it to keep the Communists from taking over Syria, they had done it in the service of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism and Gamal Abdel Nasser. The problem was to find some role for the Syrians.

And so what they did was to take Shukri al-Kuwatli, who was one of the leaders of the old Nationalist Party of Syria, and bestow upon him the title of the First Citizen of the United Arab Republic.

And he came, with a great deal of ceremony, on a visit to Aleppo. The consular corps was summoned to go out to the airport and meet him and then go back into town and go to a

reception that was being held in his honor at the Mohafazat. On the way from the airport to town, my car had a flat tire, and I had to drop out of the cortege. A couple of cars behind me was the Egyptian Ambassador in Syria, who later became the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mahmoud Riad. He stopped his car and said, "Can I help you?"

And I said, "Yes, indeed. I would like to go on to the reception."

So he took me in his car. I arrived with the Egyptian Ambassador at the reception for the First Citizen of the UAR.

Q: That must have caused some raised eyebrows.

ATHERTON: Well, we kept in touch over the years, actually. I saw him not too long ago in London and recalled that event. He'd forgotten about it, but I hadn't.

So that was really the end of the tour in Aleppo. Aleppo life went on pretty much the same, except for the addition of the Egyptians and the increasing disenchantment of the Syrians with the results of the union, in terms of their role in it.

Q: Before you finish completely, could I ask you a question about that? Did this establishment of the UAR and the presence of Egyptians in Aleppo make any difference at all to your day-to-day operations?

ATHERTON: No, it did not. Not really, because our operations were with the municipal authorities and the private business community, to a very large extent. A lot of our role there was dealing not with the government so much as with the private community. And that went on pretty much without change as it had been. Later, of course, there was a move towards establishing the kind of political-economic system in Syria that Nasser had established in Egypt, including nationalization of industries, banks, and agricultural estates and all of that. But that came after our time, in fact after the end of the union with Egypt in 1961 when the Ba'ath Party came to power. When we were there, they had not yet begun to change the basic social or economic structure. It was just the political structure that was affected.

It had an impact on our children, who became ardent Nasserists. Our two sons, particularly our older son, got caught up in the spirit. He went to Aleppo College, which is almost entirely Syrian youth being taught in English. He was one of the few non-Syrians at Aleppo College, which was run by Americans. Michael, then age eleven, became quite imbued with the spirit of pan-Arabism and of Arab Socialism, which was basically what Nasser's philosophy was all about. He insisted that we have posters of Nasser at the Consulate.

Anyway, this was nearing the end of our tour, and I had already been told who my replacement would be. I had thought we were going to be there longer, but the Department personnel system, as is often the case, changed the signals, having more or less assured us that we would be there at least until the following spring.

They changed what I thought was a commitment. I've learned since that there are no assignments in the personnel system that cannot be changed for the needs of the Service. And it was suddenly

decided that what was best for the Service was for the Athertons to be transferred earlier than we'd planned.

This was because they wanted to put in Aleppo a very senior officer with Arab world experience named Philip Ireland. Phil Ireland was my replacement, in effect, as Consul General. He had been in Salonika, and, I later learned, someone in the personnel system wanted to go to Salonika. So I was at the end of the chain, the most junior person involved.

We packed up and turned over the residence, which we had just by then really begun to get furnished. It took us a year plus for the Department to find enough money to properly furnish the residence. We finally had it looking pretty good, just in time to turn it over to the Irelands to move in. And we moved on.

The personnel system, in effect, had finally caught up with me. I had, up to this point, never had a Department tour of duty. This was now almost 1959, and I came into the service in 1947, so I was overdue. It was 12 years from the time I came in the Service until I had my first Department assignment, other than the very brief training at the beginning and a couple of quick courses in connection with home leave at the FSI.

I was assigned to the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs. In those days, we still had offices rather than country directorates. I was assigned as the number two officer on the Iraq/Jordan Desk, which was part of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs. And I learned my first lesson in making the transition from being a big fish in a little pond to a little fish in a big pond.

I was The Boss in Aleppo, albeit of a post that only had five Americans including myself. It started out with four Americans plus a small Foreign Service national staff, mostly Syrian and a couple of Palestinians. And so I represented the United States, flew the flag on my car, called on the Governor, and called on all the religious dignitaries at appropriate religious holidays. Aleppo had something like 13 Christian Bishops and Archbishops from all the different and obscure sects of the Eastern and Roman churches, plus, of course, the usual Islamic dignitaries. It was quite a heady experience for a fairly junior, young officer to be representing the United States, even if it was only in Aleppo. To go back and find that I was suddenly number two on the Iraq/Jordan Desk took a little adjusting of my perception of where my place was in the universe of the Foreign Service.

I was the Jordan Desk officer, in effect. I worked under Bill Lakeland, who was then the Officer in Charge of Iraq/Jordan Affairs. The Office Director was Stuart Rockwell, and Armin Meyer was his Deputy in those days. Armin eventually became the Director, and Nick Thacher came in as the Deputy. But when I first went in, it was Stu Rockwell and Armin Meyer. There was an Assistant Secretary but I rarely got beyond the front office of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs.

ROBERT A. LINCOLN
Information Officer and Public Affairs Officer
Damascus (1955-1958)

Robert A. Lincoln was born in New York in 1921. As a Foreign Service officer, Mr. Lincoln served in Syria, Ceylon, Turkey, and Washington, DC. He was interviewed by G. Lewis Schmidt on April 19, 1989.

LINCOLN: My first post was in Damascus, Syria. I think that I was sent to Syria under the traditional military concept: I did not speak French, I did not speak Arabic, and those are the two languages you are most likely to run into out there, but they needed somebody to work in Syria.

Q: *What was the year that you went to Syria?*

LINCOLN: This was 1955, in the spring. I knew roughly where it was because I had once studied geography and had some maps from National Geographic. Syria was on the eastern end of the Mediterranean. When I went out there I learned, of course, that Syria was over the hill, as it were, from the Lebanon. In those days Lebanon was considered the swinging door on the Near East five-and-dime. We used to go from Syria over the mountains to the Lebanon quite regularly, practically every week, in order to get milk, because you could buy milk in the Lebanon -- you couldn't get it up in Syria at all -- and also to buy beef and ham. You couldn't buy either in Syria. Nearly everyone there (Syria) was Islamic. Even though their citizenry manufactured some of the finest Arak, which is an alcoholic drink; allied to Pernod, it turns milky-colored when you pour it into water, as you probably know. At any rate, the Syrians produced Arak, but they themselves allegedly didn't buy it. They only sold it to somebody else. Well, I have a feeling that the foreign community in Damascus bought enough of it to support the whole industry in Syria. I don't know about that for a fact. At any rate, about every week or so we went over to the Lebanon in order to get ham and beef, things of that kind, which you just plain couldn't get in Syria. All you could get in Syria, naturally, was lamb -- awfully tasty lamb, I might add. I learned all sorts of lamb dishes as a result.

Provided we didn't have enough sense, perhaps, to understand what Syria provided -- there was a superb opportunity since we, sitting there in the mid-1950s, had a grandstand seat in history. We were able to watch the tremendous changes going on in the Arab world at the time, even though Syria subsequently has become a place rather difficult to live in. At that time, although the psychological hardships may have been somewhat noticeable, nevertheless, the physiological hardships were absolutely nil. Our ambassador at the time was a man named James Moose.

Q: *How do you spell that?*

LINCOLN: M-O-O-S-E, like the animal, and in fact he thought his name so unusual that he had located as many other people as possible, like F-O-X, etc., in the U.S. Foreign Service who had animalistic names. I remember that at one cocktail party when an AID man turned up with a name of this sort Moose said, guess how many else there are like me? Moose carefully clicked them all off. They were all old friends. Moose was a brilliant cynic. He typifies, I think, what probably existed during that time as the absolutely perfect Foreign Service officer. First, he was terribly well educated. Second, he read, wrote and spoke classical Arabic, the language of the country. To find anybody who handles classical Arabic today is almost impossible. He had learned it in the old State Department School in Paris. He was one of the first who went there in, I assume, the 1920s. His cynicism expressed itself in any number of Moosisms which he used to,

well, spout as the occasion suggested. I call them Moosisms because I collected them. I was very fortunate, as I said, to work with a man like this. I remember, for example -- and we will cite a Moosism here -- where a younger officer named Dick Funkhouser, who had been assigned as economics officer to Damascus, came into a staff meeting. This was after Funkhouser had been there several weeks. In the middle of the staff meeting, when he was called on for his comments, he looked up and said, "Mr. Ambassador, I have discovered what is wrong with the Syrians." A few seconds went by and the ambassador asked, "And what, Mr. Funkhouser, have you discovered?" Funkhouser said -- incidentally, he later became an ambassador -- Funkhouser said, "The problem with the Syrians is that they have a massive inferiority complex." There wasn't a sound in the country team meeting for at least thirty seconds. Moose ultimately looked up and said, "No, Mr. Funkhouser, that isn't quite right. The trouble is that they are probably correct." One day Moose explained the difficulty of trying to transliterate the Arabic language -- again, which he handled extremely well. A man named Jim Akins, who was then a very young assistant economics officer, went in to see Moose. Akins was proud because he, Akins, had just been admitted to the Foreign Service School, the FSI school, in Beirut to study Arabic, and he thought Ambassador Moose would be very pleased with this-- that, you know, one of his underlings liked the area so much that he had decided that he would give his career to the Arab world and to the Arabic language. Incidentally, Akins became well known as ambassador twenty or thirty years later in Saudi Arabia. Akins went in to tell Moose about the FSI School and his admission -- by the way, I learned about this because I was waiting in an anteroom and when Akins came out he told me all about it. Moose looked at him and said, "Now, what is it you want to see me on today, Mr. Akins?" Akins said, "I wanted to tell you that as of September of this year, I have been accepted into and will enter the FSI school in the Arabic language down in Beirut. What do you think of that?" According to Akins, Moose then looked up and said, "Now, let me see, you are going there in September, and the course will be a little more than a year, eighteen months or so. You are going to come out with probably an R4 and an S3 in the Arabic language. It is extremely difficult. Once you have that R4/S3, you will have the key that opens the door to an empty room."

There used to be a tremendous number of trucks in Syria. At that time they were usually old American trucks because the Syrians, like others in the Arab world, had bought a lot of American automotive equipment in the late 1940s and discovered that it was extremely good. You would see old Dodge cars and Chryslers and Chevrolets and Fords used as dolmush, that is, crowded taxis between Damascus and Beirut. You wondered sometimes how they kept running.

You learned fairly quickly the old American cars were among the few in the world that would go way, way beyond what they were supposed to. Instead of going one thousand miles they would go ten or fifteen or twenty thousand miles without a change of oil. The Arab people learned this fairly quickly. Naturally, there were also a lot of old trucks. There were old Mack trucks. There was any kind of truck. On top of every single one of them over the cab was a big sign in Arabic. At first I couldn't translate it and then I learned how to. I was told that this was "Inshallah." This was over the top of every cab of every truck that you saw driving in that area.

Q: I've seen the signs.

LINCOLN: You remember them, too?

Q: Turkey has them, too.

LINCOLN: Turkey has them. Anywhere they use the Arabic script, I suspect. Well, at any rate, Moose said, "This is a good illustration of the fact that you cannot easily translate the Arabic language. What does it mean? Well, we Americans transliterate it, "If God wills." 'If' is the wrong word, because 'if' to an Arab -- there is no such thing. You either do it or you don't. There is no such thing as 'if'.

"'God' -- well, 'God' is a transliteration of Allah, but Allah and God are two totally different matters. They may be chiefs of formal religions and all that and they may stem even from the same kind of source, but they are quite different. The concept from the people who follow Islam and the concept from the people who follow Christianity are quite different things. "Then, 'wills'. You know, we as Christians have some sense of free will, Protestants more than the Catholics, but it is there. It isn't that God controls everything you do, but rather that you as an individual have some control over your will. You may decide to a degree what you will do. It will depend on your religion as to whether your decision is completely free or somewhat limited -- whereas in Islam there is no such thing as that. Free will doesn't exist. The will is Allah's. Whether or not you decide to do thus and so, something may interfere to prevent that.

"So", said Moose, "you cannot translate 'Inshallah'. Rather, give it a cultural translation. 'Inshallah' when printed on a sign over the top of a truck cab is what makes it possible for a Syrian driver to pass another Syrian driver at sixty miles an hour on a blind curve." Enough of that. I had a tremendous opportunity, in other words, in being in Damascus for my first post. I went out as an information officer and later became Public Affairs Officer, although at that time a relatively young PAO. I was still thirty-three or thirty-four. From Damascus, after three years, I was transferred to Ceylon.

Q: Before we leave Damascus, what was the nature of your program in Syria? I don't know whether we were working on country objectives at that time or not, but if we were did you have any and what were they?

LINCOLN: Well, we should have been working on country objectives. This reminds me somehow, though, of what happened with Bill King, who was PAO in Baghdad at the time. Let me see, was he there then or was he there a few years later? No, he was there at that time, that's right.

Q: He was there at the time.

LINCOLN: In 1958, you recall, there was an anti-western coup in Baghdad which affected us throughout the Arab world. The American military landed in the Lebanon in the month of June. We were up in Syria at the time. He had not filed -- that is, King had not filed from USIS Baghdad -- his country plan. Finally, the USIA Assistant Director for that area back in USIA got really disturbed about it. He needed something on paper. As I understood it from Bill, the Assistant Director, sent to Bill a telegram: What are your country objectives?

RICHARD FUNKHOUSER
Near Eastern Affairs, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon Desk
Washington DC (1952)

Ambassador Richard Funkhouser was born and raised in Trenton, New Jersey. He graduated from Princeton University with a Degree in the Liberal Arts. He began working for Standard Oil but eventually moved on to the Foreign Service in 1945. During his active duty he has served in Paris, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Moscow, Gabon, Vietnam, and Scotland. This interview was conducted on February 2, 1988 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Well, I notice you became acting DCM in Damascus rather soon in your career. How did this come about? This was 1955 to 1958.

FUNKHOUSER: The foundation for that, basically, was that my second job was Petroleum Attaché for the entire Middle East from Tehran to the Sudan, from Aden to Istanbul. And I had been to all of the countries of the Middle East, including Syria, over a two-year period reporting on some of the most extraordinary and revolutionary movements in the energy world. I was very lucky to have that job, because in those days, in '47 to '49, we Americans were just trying to get a foothold in the Middle East. We had some concessions in Saudi Arabia, but there were tremendous purchases taking place by Standard Jersey and Socony, and Standard of California and Texas, plus "independents." And I really got a rich background in a global development and an overview of the Middle East from what is not an unimportant base, that is, the oil point of view, which is political, strategic and economic.

So, I had both political and economic background in the Middle East, and when the job in Damascus came up I went there, first, as Economic Counselor, then I was put in charge of the Political Section as well, and ended up as DCM.

Q: Let me ask this. Coming in as a petroleum expert into what was still partly the old Foreign Service, which had a certain disdain, or at least had a reputation for disdain for experts, did you find any problems with the Foreign Service in accepting you or being able to operate within that environment?

FUNKHOUSER: Yes, yes I did. And consequently I made it a key aim in my career to get out of oil expertise. I came back as George McGhee's so-called petroleum advisor for the Middle East in '49. And that was like advising the Encyclopedia Britannica on oil. He made his first hundred million as a Rhodes scholar who found a huge gas field in Louisiana. But in any event, my aim was to get out of specialization for just that reason. It was certainly very useful to me because it gave me infinitely more responsibilities than other junior officers and enabled me to get promoted faster, which was in every ambitious Foreign Service officer's interest. But after six highly exciting and productive years as an oil expert, I asked if I could get into the political section. I became, in '52 I think, the desk officer for Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. That really moved me into the accepted service.

Also, I had taken my Foreign Service exams. I got into State as an expert, but I had been advised strongly at the onset by Newby Walmsley and other career Foreign Service officers that to be an FS0-6 [Foreign Service Officer Class Six] is infinitely more important to your career than to be an FSR-2 [Foreign Service Reserve Officer Class Two].

Q: We're talking about a Foreign Service reserve officer.

FUNKHOUSER: That's right. So I took my exams, and I got through them and came in. I went backwards, dropped my reserve commission, and went back into FS0-6, which was the bottom, Third Secretary, at a loss of salary, but I got into the mainstream. Yes, you're right. There was a spirit against the expert in those days, and rightfully so. I wanted to move into the political area, as well as the broader economic area.

WILLIAM A. STOLTZFUS
Political Officer
Syria (1956)

William A. Stoltzfus was born in Beirut in 1924. He attended Princeton University and then entered the Naval Air Corps. He entered the Foreign Service in 1949 and his career included positions in Libya, Kuwait, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and an ambassadorship to Kuwait. Ambassador Stoltzfus was interviewed by Lillian P Mullin in May 1994.

Q: Damascus?

STOLTZFUS: Damascus. And of course Damascus was right in the hub of area affairs. Plenty of action from the very beginning of my assignment. I took over from Alford Atherton, who was the political officer. Ed Waggoner was head of the Political Section. The Syrians are very sophisticated people. We led a totally different life in Damascus. And the Suez crisis was developing. It was clear that trouble was brewing. Our American evacuation out of Damascus occurred fairly early on. I was only there about six months as I recall.

My job there was the typical political officer's job where you seek out people who seem knowledgeable in terms of politics and so on. One didn't settle down very well because the situation was so uncertain. James Moose was Ambassador there at the time. And there wasn't an awful lot of freedom of action. I was the junior man in the political section then.

Q: The worry seemed to be, I thought at that time, whether there would be some influence from the Soviet Union as they were trying to get some kind of base or position in that area. And had offered arms or to build something...I don't know if it was a pipeline?

STOLTZFUS: I'm really fairly vague on that myself. I was there such a short time. Again, it is very interesting. My entire career was peripheral to the Arab - Israeli question. I had very

little direct activity at all with that problem. The policies I related to were to keep the oil flowing and to keep the Soviets out of the area if we could. Peripheral also for me was the 1956 invasion of Egypt by Israel and France and Britain, which of course Eisenhower opposed.

Nevertheless, the Soviets were looking for any opportunity to get in. A senior official of their Foreign Ministry - Shepilov, his name was - came to visit Damascus when I was there. I went out to the airport just to view the scene. He was there obviously to make as many nickels for the Soviet Union as possible. They were becoming extremely active. I don't recall if that was their first effort there but certainly that was a major effort by the Soviets to make inroads in Syria. Which of course became very successful later on. I think it was mainly an offer of arms and obviously support against Israel and so forth. It gave them their opening.

Q: And Syria was saying they were afraid they were going to be attacked so they needed to be...

STOLTZFUS: The Syrians...the Arab world was virulently against our pro-Israeli policies. Of course in the beginning, from 1946 on, there was a constant barrage of criticism by the Arabs. Unfortunately the Arabs were always fighting wars that they lost. Each time they lost the war they would say, "Well, we'll take what you had offered before the last war." They were always one war too late. If you would just take what was then offered, you'd certainly be far ahead because once you lost the war, then you were losing some more. They couldn't seem to understand that once you lost you were not likely to have the same conditions as you had before the war. And they just constantly did that. I am very fond of my Arab friends, but basically in terms of the policies of their governments, they are real losers. They have always been losers as far as I can see.

But the Syrians were virulently anti-American. They weren't on an individual basis. Those of us who were out there were always accused of being pro-Arab and loving the Arabs and all this. Robert Kaplan has written a book about Arabists, which you may or may not have seen, which is the usual accusation that American and British Arabists have fallen in love with the Arabs and therefore they can't see anything beyond their emotional attachment. They are just a bunch of romantics that don't understand "real politique". That is basically it.

Of course those of us who were out there have a feeling that is a total misreading of what we were trying to do. Which is first of all to stay in touch with the Arabs. And you don't stay in touch with them by rubbing their faces in your differences. You make clear what American policy is and then you show some personal sympathy for some of their points of view. And you also try to tell Washington a little bit about what the other side is. Instead of saying, "Yes, you are right." And our domestic situation is such that we are strongly influenced by the domestic scene as much as by the foreign scene. We were non-PC, obviously. I don't mind being accused of not being politically correct from Washington's point of view. But I certainly resent people suggesting that we were just a bunch of romantics who didn't understand. You have to present the situation as you see it, and that would be presumably one of the primary jobs of a foreign diplomat: to present the situation as he sees it on the spot. That's what he's there for. That's what he's paid for.

Anyway, the Syrians have always felt that they were the cutting edge of Arab resistance to Israel and that they have always rejected the idea that Israel should exist at all. But now of course they are gradually getting to the point where they are trying to come to some accommodation which would mean their getting back lands that were taken away from them by the Israelis.

Of course, the Israelis, again, they won the war so you have to realize that the people who lose things don't necessarily get them back very quickly without quid pro quo. But the Syrians were obviously using the Soviets. And the Soviets were using Syrians during those days to counter American influence in the area through Israel. There was a congruence of interests, obviously.

ARTHUR L. LOWRIE
Junior Officer
Aleppo (1957-1959)

Arthur L. Lowrie was born in Pennsylvania in 1930. He graduated from Allegheny College with an A.B. degree in 1955. He served in the U.S. Air Force from 1951 to 1954. Mr. Lowrie joined the Foreign Service in 1956, serving in Syria, Lebanon, Sudan, Tunisia, Iraq, Egypt, and the U.S. Mission to the European Communities in Belgium. Mr. Lowrie was interviewed by Patricia Lessard and Theodore Lowrie several times between 1989 and 1991.

Q: Would you talk about your early posts and your career at that time and anything of historical interest.

LOWRIE: My first post was really an ideal one. Aleppo, Syria. I got there the day of the opening January 2, 1957. Two officers to begin with, Roy Atherton the Consul General, who went on to become a very distinguished Ambassador, Assistant Secretary and Director General of the Foreign Service. He taught me a great deal. It was an ideal post, not only because of Roy Atherton, but I had an opportunity to do all those things that young FSOs should, consular work primarily but also commercial work, protection and welfare and even a bit of political work. I learned that I definitely wanted to be a political officer. It was also my first contact with the Arabic language, except for the Air Force service in Libya, and I began studying Arabic part-time.

The highlights of that tour were the formation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958; the visit to Aleppo of Gamal Abdel Nasser in March of 1958 which was a tumultuous affair, hundreds of thousands of people, tremendous enthusiasm for Nasser personally; and my first real experience with an Arab mob, which can be frightening even when they're happy. Another highlight was one of my few scoops. On New Year's Day 1959 I called on the Director General of G2, Marwan Sibai, as a courtesy call the way we did on all the religious and civil dignitaries on major holidays. Marwan Sibai informed me that he had been up all night arresting communists and it wasn't just true of the northern region of the UAR or Aleppo, it was

throughout the United Arab Republic including Egypt. On New Year's Day the late John Wheelock--a great guy--who was then Acting Consul General, and I got out the old one-time pads and sent an immediate message to Washington about Nasser's crackdown on the communist party.

I was then sent back to the Department (that was the practice then, the first two years in the Department, next two years in the field, or vice versa) where I spent two years in INR writing the old NIS for Greece, Turkey and Iran. I think I did industry and mining for Iran and Turkey. A very painstaking and laborious work considered very dull by most officers, including me, but of enormous benefit to my later career because it taught me the need for thoroughness and accuracy.

PARKER T. HART
Consul General
Damascus (1958)

Ambassador Parker T. Hart was born in Massachusetts in 1910. He received a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College in 1933, a master's degree from Harvard University in 1935. He also attended l'Institut de Hautes Etudes Internationales in Geneva, Switzerland in 1936 and Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in 1936. He entered the Foreign Service in 1938. Ambassador Hart's career included positions in Brazil, Egypt, Syria, Washington, DC, and ambassadorships to Saudi Arabia and Turkey. He was interviewed in 1989 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: The Arab Federal State, so called, which was between Jordan and Iraq, was announced on February 14.

HART: In the meantime, telegrams flew back and forth as the discussion proceeded about implementing this basic decision of federation between the two. It was finally resolved that Waldemar Gallman would be the ambassador and, therefore, my post in Jordan was canceled. I was asked to resign it before getting there. Instead, I was to go to Syria as consul general in Damascus with the personal rank of Minister.

Friends in the Department and NEA, particularly Lampton Berry and Bill Rountree, insisted that I be given the personal rank of minister as a consolation for having lost an embassy. It was nice of them. So I was made consul general with personal rank of minister to Damascus which was now a part of the United Arab Republic. The person whom I was replacing was Charles Yost, who had just been sworn in about a month earlier as ambassador to Syria, his first embassy post, and had taken his position there but had found the atmosphere rather strange. Sure enough, it was strange because he was going to lose his post, and he lost it by the union with Egypt which took place in February. I think he had only been there about a month before his whole position was washed out. Charles was in rather bad shape. He was broke and ill. When we arrived, he still was living in the Residence but trying to recover from amoebic dysentery which he'd picked up on a

trip which he'd recently made outside to Jordan. I think he'd been to Petra and there picked up the bug. We were living in the same house, the Mardom Bey house, which became the embassy residence in the Abu Rumani district of Damascus. He was trying to recover and we were just settling in. We were temporary house mates. He was at the office when he could be. He was well enough to get around but still very weak. Furthermore, he didn't know where he was going to go. There was no other embassy immediately available for him.

Q: Did he still hold ambassadorial rank at that time?

HART: No. By the time the United Arab Republic was proclaimed the union recognized no ambassadors to Damascus, but there were a number of lame ducks still around. They hadn't been transferred out yet. For instance, Adnan Kural, the Turkish ambassador and a very fine man, was still there. I got to know him quite well. Once the ambassador moved out, they were replaced by senior consular officers. The Syrians made quite a point that consular officers were not to be engaged in political work. No political officers were recognized. Of course, we simply converted the consulate general into a pocket embassy and our consular officers reported to Washington on political and economic topics, as would an embassy. Charles Yost eventually got his orders to go home and he departed. Jane and I and the children were in Damascus for almost exactly six months, from mid-March to mid-September of 1958. It was an eventful period. The first part was largely devoted to settling in and reorganizing what had been an American legation into a consulate general, changing the signs on the door, changing our roster of people. We had to get rid of the military and other attachés. I remember the air attaché was able to get a Globemaster aircraft to come in and take out all of his household effects in one batch. That plane was such an impressive thing in Damascus that the Syrian police tried to keep all the Syrians away so they wouldn't see what a powerful country they were vilifying in their press. The vilification was going on all the time. The controlled press was very hostile.

Q: Who was the Syrian leader at that point?

HART: Abdul Hamid Serraj, a major of the Syrian tank corps, a faithful follower of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Anything Nasser wanted he would do. He believed in direct action. He had around him a special intelligence police who intimidated Syrians. Most Syrians hardly dared come to the consulate general but some did. I did receive visitors. We also tried to entertain at dinners. I joined the Rotary Club as a result of an invitation that came to me from a member of it who represented the Mobil Oil Company in Syria. He had nerve enough to come to my office, and ask me if I'd join. I did because it gave me a little contact with Syrians I wouldn't have possibly had otherwise. We'd go to evening dinners and things of that kind that the Rotary organized. It was a normal Rotary Club. When we tried to invite people to our house, we found them wary and might well they should be because we could hear the screams of people being tortured up the street by Abdul Hamid Serraj's bully boys, only two blocks away.

I called on Serraj as I, of course, had to for protocol reasons. He immediately tried to get me to talk about an earlier incident that involved CIA and an attempt to smuggle a Syrian informant of Syria out in the trunk of a CIA car--Remember? Miles Copeland and others, I believe, were involved. I just told him that that was a matter which occurred before my time in this area and that I really had nothing to clarify it. That's about all I could say. I had heard about it, of course.

He wanted to know if I'd heard about it and I said, "Yes."

Q: This was the smuggling out of an alleged Syrian agent.

HART: Serraj launched into a diatribe about the United Arab Republic. All Arabs were going to be obliged to join the United Arab Republic, or else. He implied he was going to use force to bring the whole of the Arab world into the United Arab Republic. He closed several newspapers while I was there which had been rather free in their expression of views until that time. He closed them saying, "You are against the union, the wehdeh (union)" and would accept no argument on the matter. Syrian papers that would have been interesting and critical disappeared, and just one or two that followed the explicit line of the government remained.

I called on some of the leaders of the Ba'ath Party, the Arab Resurrection Socialist Party. They were pleasant enough.

Then we had burst upon us the situation in Lebanon. I think it started in May when Camille Chamoun decided he wanted to have a second term as president and the constitution limited presidents to only one term of six years. His action took on the tone of an assertion of Christian supremacy over Muslims and over a popular vote or referendum (if you could have one which they didn't have). Fighting began. This was the cause of the resistance to Chamoun and was, of course, picked up by Nasser, who tried to organize armed resistance and to make sure it was successful. He used his position as head of the Union to call for insurrection in Lebanon. Arms were issued and units formed. Some of the recruits were Palestinians in Syria who were given weapons and rudimentary training and sent down into Lebanon. Lebanese frontier posts with Syria disappeared. There was one post, Mesne'a, which I remember well on the main road from Damascus to Beirut, right down in the Bakaa. The minute you came out of the hills of Syria and down into the plain, right at the foot, there was this frontier post.

In Damascus we had some shortages of food and some difficulty getting quite a few household items. We knew that down in the Bakaa was an Armenian grocery store which had catered to American residents of Beirut. They had put in a stock of things that Americans like and kept them there and had a lively little business. It was nothing like a Safeway store or anything of that size, but they had a useful inventory. We decided, despite the troubles, that we were going to send a car down to get some food and take orders from everybody. It wasn't that we were so desperately short but we were mightily inconveniently short. I decided to go with Peter Spicer of my staff in our official car. I didn't ask the embassy in Beirut for permission, which was, of course, the wrong thing to do. I knew that had I asked I would probably have been told, "No." I must admit now that part of my decision to go with Peter was curiosity to see what was happening. It was not very sound judgement. At any rate we went. At the frontier post, Masna'a, lines of oil trucks, burned out, stood in the parking area. There were no personnel in sight. There was broken glass all over the place. We drove very carefully. We were not challenged from any side and there was nobody around. It was eerie. We came down in a further decline toward the Bakaa and there was a tank with its barrel pointing right at us, so we slowed up. A Lebanese officer got out and demanded that we stop which we did. He wanted to inspect our trunk, which we opened up and there was nothing there. It was empty, of course, because we were on our way to fill it with food. He waved us on through. We went over to Shtawrah to this Armenian store

where they welcomed us, glad to see some customers. We filled up the car with all the orders. They had everything.

They offered us a roll of hot unleavened bread stuffed with greens and we ate that as our lunch. We then turned around and drove back, past the tank and up through Masna'a. At that point we began to worry a little bit because banditry could easily be in those steep hills around both sides. It's a gorge going up through the hills and we had heard of a case of some people being robbed by armed brigands. However, we made it through without incident. Everybody was very glad to see the food. Of course, I made a report on what we'd seen. That aroused an instantaneous reaction by Ambassador Rob McClintock saying, "What do you mean by coming into my territory without my permission?" [Laughter] That was the end of the incident. Rob later visited us, he came as our houseguest. He wanted to see what was going on on the other Syrian side. Later, Jane and I went to Beirut together with the kids and stayed at the embassy. Jane was even able to go to Ain Tab, a hill station that belonged to William A. Eddy, our old friend. It was a summer place with spectacular view that he used, and there was firing and shooting all night in that area. This was not so close as to actually place Jane in imminent danger, but Bill Eddy, a combat Marine veteran of World War I, gave her instructions to take cover if fighting came closer.

Soon afterward, the U.S. Marines landed and the situation became quiet in Beirut.

Q: The Marines landed on July 1958, as I recall.

HART: Yes. Before the decision was made to send the Marines, I sent in numerous reports on the intervention of Abdul Hamid Serraj's boys in the Lebanese standoff and civil war. As you may remember, the basta district of Beirut was the center of the resistance to Camille Chamoun. In fact, that whole section of the city was blocked off and under control of the resistance. The amount of intervention in the affair from the Syrian side, which was always denied by Cairo, we knew was considerable. Some very intelligent and very courageous Syrian businessmen took it on themselves to come and see me in my office and tell me about it. I made full reports on what they had told me. I had big maps out and I was following everything in as close detail as I could. We were getting a lot of intelligence reports along with regular embassy reports flying back and forth, so we were pretty much abreast of what people felt and saw down there in Beirut. We were supplying material which was used in the American delegation to the United Nations as background information. But I was very careful, in the case of these courageous informers, to tell Washington and the U.S.-U.N., "Please do not quote these people."

Henry Cabot Lodge got up in the UN and he almost blew me out of the water. He didn't actually give the names but he described the people in order to lend credence to stories that I had provided him with in his denunciation of Egyptian-Syrian intervention in the internal affairs of Lebanon. He didn't clear it with me or anybody else. He was a very arrogant man. He knew what he wanted to do and he was no team player. He held a position in the government which was almost like that of the Secretary of State. In fact, he didn't even recognize the authority of the Secretary of State. He said so once when Bob Murphy attempted to make a point with him that what he had done was contrary to the policy of the Department and to specific instructions by Dulles. He in effect told Bob Murphy to forget it, saying, "If you have any problem with what I

do, go and see the President. He'll set you straight."

He figured that by being campaign manager for Eisenhower, he had a very privileged position and indeed he did, and he was in the Cabinet.

All this was of no concern of mine. My concern was whether he had blown my sources. So far as I was able to determine, nobody took any action against those men who had been my informants. There may have been a reason for it. They may have been afraid.

When it was heard that the Marines were coming in, the Egyptian representative--who was not an ambassador but a special representative of Nasser intended to keep an eye that Abdul Hamid Serraj wouldn't be the exclusive link with Cairo--came to me and said he was very nervous about a rumor that U.S. troops, already in Lebanon, might march to Damascus.

He asked, "Will they come to Syria?"

I said, "I don't know."

I deliberately left him with that to mull over. Syrians approached our little Marine guard unit and asked the gunny sergeant, "Are the Marines coming up here?"

He replied, "Sure. They'll be here for breakfast tomorrow morning."

We had a demonstration once outside of the consular general office building. It happened in an early evening when I was at the home of one of our staff for some little social event. I got the call that a big crowd had gathered right outside our entrance and were chanting and making a lot of rather threatening noises. The Marine guard were braced for defense. I went from that house immediately to our house, our residence, to get on a more reliable telephone and called in and said, "Shall I come?"

They said, "You don't need to, sir. The crowd is gone."

I said, "What happened?"

They said, "Well, a contingent of the special forces arrived, picked up the whole crowd and put them in trucks and took them away."

So I was relieved on two counts. We didn't have a crisis right there and then. The other was that there was no shooting by the Marines either. We had an indication that the Syrians were very worried. I decided, however, to make them a little more worried, not just for that purpose alone but because I thought it was wise. We started reducing our files. I had big, bulging diplomatic files going years back. I got our staff together and ordered them to burn files on the roof using oil drums and chemicals for fast destruction. We had no inside furnace that could do that kind of thing. So the Marine guard and others burned what was given to them by the more knowledgeable staff of the material that we could spare and was duplicated in Washington. We didn't have to have it. It was the kind of material that, if the Abdul Hamid's forces had grabbed it, could have made a lot of trouble for us, intelligence reports and all sorts of classified material.

They took these oil drums up on the roof which had a gravel over asphalt surface and they watched it very carefully while they burned the stuff up. The oil drums made a big noise as they turned them over to cool off. After using one they would let it cool off before they put in another load. The yellow smoke was going up in the air for everybody to see. I was receiving visitors in the meantime in my office, interestingly enough, still coming in with information. We would hear this bumping and banging up on the roof overhead.

They wondered what it was and I said, "It's just the oil drums."

We made no secret that this was taking place and we did reduce our files so that we would be in a position to destroy the final element on very, very short notice. However, we were never aware of being threatened with an invasion of our premises at any time. In fact, one day a Syrian guard outside who had a machine pistol, was toying with it; was obviously not well trained and lost control of his weapon. It sprayed the building with bullets. One went right through the window passing just a foot or two from the head of my economic officer who ducked down. Another police officer came up quickly and grabbed him, turned the weapon off, put the safety catch on, and took the guard into custody. That was the nearest thing to any hostile action, and it wasn't really hostile at all. It was just a fellow who didn't know how to handle his weapon, acting perhaps out of boredom.

Q: How did you read Dulles' decision to go into Lebanon?

HART: I was personally opposed to it. It didn't seem to me like the right thing to do. I have to say afterwards that I think it may have helped. If it had been I who had had any recommendation to make--nobody asked me, of course, I would have said, "Don't do it." This was based on the general principle that, when we try to get into something and use our muscle, we usually make things worse. At least I felt that way. It "savored of imperialism" as they called it and came on the heels of the British intervention in the canal area. I just felt that that wasn't the right thing to do and wasn't going to really advance the situation. As it turned out--partly as a result of very skillful action by Rob McClintock, who was a good officer in an emergency--General Shehab prevented an actual confrontation on the beaches as our Marines landed by, as he said, "kidnaping" the general out of his office and getting him down there to the beach where he could then tell the tank commander to turn the barrels the other way. "Don't aim at these people." This was fortunate and it had a calming effect. Shehab, as you know, became President of Lebanon.

Q: I was wondering if you saw this as part of Dulles' frustration with Nasser as well as a general signal to the Soviets that we had not--

HART: There was no question that Dulles knew that Nasser was behind a lot of this although he was not the fountain of the trouble. The trouble began because of Chamoun's ambition to perpetuate himself President. He felt that he had the backing of the United States. It turned into a kind of U.S. indirect confrontation with Nasser again. Nasser, of course, was giving out a version of the Lebanese situation which was distorted according to his propaganda needs. The argument was intense in the United Nations, in the General Assembly and the Security Council. Russia got into it. Khrushchev, I think, was in power. He threatened to turn the American fleet into steel

coffins. He used terms like that, but then he did nothing about it. Nasser made a hurried trip to Moscow which he depicted later as being an effort to prevent Khrushchev from taking action and starting World War III. Actually we believed that he went there to try to get Khrushchev to take military action, but Khrushchev preferred just to talk about it and make noises. That was not lost on the area, that is, that the Soviet Union in a pinch was not going to risk a war with the United States Sixth Fleet which was right there in numbers and just standing off the shores of Lebanon.

Actually, it developed that we bought a little time for Lebanon by this intervention. So that's the way it worked out. I think that we've seen now that it wouldn't work again. After what happened a few years ago in 1982, we would never do this again, probably. The idea that we have some special thing to defend in Lebanon was based on a superficial knowledge of the country, in my opinion. It's a very complex situation as we all know. The complexity of it and the difficulty of dealing with just one sect like Chamoun's, asserting that he represents all of Lebanon--Charles Malik, very eloquently sounded off on the same theme--this line of argument had very deeply influenced American policy. But it did not represent judgement in depth, in my opinion, about the situation in the area or about Lebanon itself. That's why I was against it, but nobody asked me for my opinion. I was, of course, totally occupied with intelligence reporting.

I was ordered out to go back and be Deputy Assistant Secretary in September of 1958, so I was in Syria on duty for six months. These were a very interesting six months for another reason and that was that we had the revolution in Iraq, the disappearance of the federation between Jordan and Iraq in mid-July. This was an event which also influenced Washington disproportionately. The Administration saw itself as defending a Western position in the Arab world, namely Lebanon, against powerful, hostile forces subservient to Nasser and influenced by the Soviet Union and as giving the Soviet Union an increasingly important position.

On the ground in Syria, the Syrian reaction to the revolution in Iraq was very interesting. The Syrians Ba'ath Party people took the following line, semi-publicly: "Well, this means that we're going to have a United Arab Republic made up of three countries, and Syria will be right in the middle to guide this. Damascus will be the real headquarters. We Syrians have the ideological core here, in any case. The Ba'ath Party belongs here. This is where its strength is. So Iraq will join us. Egypt will supply Nasser as the front man but will not be running the show which they can't do anyway. They don't know how to run anything." The Syrian attitude toward the Egyptians was that they were very poor administrators.

It didn't work out as the Syrians hoped. In fact, Iraq was a very bloody affair. I talked to one Syrian who was caught in Baghdad but managed to escape being torn limb from limb, as some people were. He had a lot to tell me about the savagery of the Iraqi mob. There was an interesting reaction in Syria--first there was elation and then there was deep disappointment that a three-power Union didn't eventuate. That was apparent before I left.

Then we went back to Washington, arriving early October, 1958.

CURTIS F. JONES

**Political Reporting Officer
Damascus (1958-1962)**

Curtis F. Jones was born in Bangor, Maine in 1921. He graduated from Bangor College in 1942 and then served in the Army for three years. Towards the end of the war he became interested in Foreign Affairs. In addition to Syria, his overseas career has included Lebanon, Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. He was interviewed by Tomas F. Conlon on March 29, 1994.

Q: How did you learn about your assignment to Damascus or did it come "out of the blue"?

JONES: "Out of the blue." [The assignment] was not negotiated. However, as it happened, it was the best assignment I ever had, as far as I was concerned. It was just about six months after Syrian-Egyptian union had been proclaimed, under Nasser's leadership.

Q: So this was the UAR.

JONES: Yes. The United Arab Republic. It was also about a year after the notorious Rocky Stone affair in Damascus.

Q: Could you explain what that was? This would be the Rocky Stone affair in 1957.

JONES: In 1957 in Damascus. Rocky Stone, I believe, was the [CIA] Chief of Station. He had established contact with some of the officers of the Syrian Army, with the objective of promoting a change of regime and overthrowing Abdul Hamid Serraj, who was the "power center" [in Syria] at the time. He had been the head of G-2 [Syrian Army Intelligence] and had emerged as the strong man in Syria. The officers with whom Stone was dealing took his money and then went on television and announced that they had received this money from the "corrupt and sinister Americans" in an attempt to overthrow the legitimate government in Syria. Rocky Stone was expelled from the country, as well as his "confederate," Colonel Molloy, the Army Attaché. As I understand it, Colonel Molloy was not involved [in the attempted recruitment], but they threw him out because they didn't like him. They thought that he was too inquisitive.

By the time I arrived in Damascus, around July, 1958, the climate was so suspicious and hostile to Americans that it was very, very difficult for anybody to profess to be a political reporting officer. No Syrians dared to be seen with an American, except in the most inoffensive of circumstances and for valid reasons. So what we had to do, over a period of some years, was to cultivate Syrians in innocuous contexts, such as on the tennis court and that sort of thing. Even socially, it wouldn't work. You couldn't invite Syrians to your house.

Q: You saved money on your representation allowance.

JONES: That's true. On the whole, Syrians are a very outgoing and gregarious people. And as time went on, the situation improved. We took actions which some people might have considered to be fawning on the Syrians. For example, after Damascus was raised to be an Embassy, Ambassador Ridgway Knight walked in the funeral procession for Abdul Hamid Serraj's brother,

I think it was. We did things like that. As a result, after I'd been in Syria for four years, we had pretty good relations with the Syrians. This also coincided with an era of good feeling with the Russians. We were all invited to the Soviet Embassy for caviar and blinis in about 1960.

When I arrived [in Damascus], the post was technically a Consulate General, because Syria had become the northern region of the UAR. Not long after I arrived, Pete [Parker T.] Hart, who was to have been Ambassador to Jordan, was switched to Damascus, because Jordan, in response to the [establishment of the] UAR, had incorporated itself in theory [into a union] with Iraq. Jordan, as such, no longer existed. So Pete became the Consul General in Damascus under Ambassador Ray Hare. Pete Hart was a superior chief of mission and was also a "driver." He believed in 12-hour days, six days a week.

Q: Was there really that much work to do?

JONES: Not really, because what happened in Syria did not seem to have any immediate, direct relevance to American interests in the Middle East. Syria had no known oil resources at that time.

Q: Syria has some trade [with the U. S.]--Latakia tobacco, I suppose.

JONES: I believe the IPC [Iraq Petroleum Company] pipeline was operating in those days. There really wasn't much trade. Syria was of interest simply as a center of "agitation" and political ferment. One major element of Damascus' political reporting was data on the infiltration of arms to the anti-Chamoun forces in Lebanon. The Syrians always like to talk about Damascus as the "beating heart" of the Middle East. No matter what their factions, the Syrians have always considered that Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon are all parts of the traditional Syria and that Syria should be the leader of that area. The first year or two [of my service] in Syria, 1958-59, was a period of rebuilding, as far as the Americans were concerned. We were trying to overcome more than the Rocky Stone episode. There had been other things, too. For example, we had financed arms purchases by Armenians who buried them in Syria. The Syrian G-2 had discovered these. This was another source of awkwardness. However, the path to better Syrian-American and Egyptian-American relations was also smoothed by Charles Yost, who, in my view, was one of the outstanding officers in the [Foreign] Service.

Yost had been appointed Ambassador to Syria when the union of Syria and Egypt was proclaimed. Nasser was still in bad odor in Washington in those days, and it would have been convenient and popular if Ambassador Yost had proposed that we resist the establishment of the UAR. Instead, Ambassador Yost, who might have concentrated on promoting his own position and career, chose instead to put in writing a recommendation that the United States "get behind" the UAR and try and do business with Nasser--and forget the resentment that we had felt toward Nasser at the time of the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

Ambassador Ray Hare, in Cairo, implemented this policy, and it was continued through my tour of duty in Damascus, which lasted until 1962 and on into the first year or two of my [subsequent assignment] to Washington.

Q: This was the period after John Kennedy came in as President in 1961. Dulles had died, I think, in 1958. So in a sense these events made it possible to put an end to some of these problems back in the past.

JONES: That is correct. As a matter of fact, John Kennedy appointed Phillips Talbot as Assistant Secretary for NEA [Near Eastern Affairs]. Under Talbot, Jack Jernegan was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near Eastern Area. However, the real policymaker for Near Eastern Affairs in the early 1960's, oddly enough, was Bob Strong, [Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs]. He went out to Baghdad as Ambassador thereafter. He was dedicated, to the point of fanaticism, in two ways: he worked seven days a week. When he became Director of NE [Office of Near Eastern Affairs], he bought or rented an apartment within walking distance of the Department [of State]. He left his family up at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he had been on the faculty of the Army War College. In effect, he just assigned himself to the Department of State, body and soul, for the three or four years that he was in this job. They asked him later on to become a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, but he declined. He preferred to remain as the Director of NE.

He was also dedicated to the concept of doing business with Nasser. Essentially, in the early 1960's, doing business with Nasser meant [providing] PL 480 [surplus agricultural commodities assistance to Egypt]. Now, when Pete Hart became Ambassador to Turkey, he was succeeded by Borden ["Bob"] Reams, who was Consul General [in Damascus] for a year or so before he went to take over four Embassies in West Africa. At that point, in September, 1961, the conservative elements in Syria rebelled and took Syria out of the UAR. This was of some personal interest to my family because practically the only military action which took place during this rebellion was an attack by Haydar al Kuzbari's desert troops on the residence of Abdul Hakim Amer. In Damascus Amer was Nasser's "proconsul," so to speak. He was running the northern region [of the UAR]. [Amer's] residence was defended by Palestinians, because the Egyptians didn't really trust the Syrians. Most of the Palestinian defenders [of Amer's residence] died in their tracks in and around that residence. Our apartment was on the other side of the street. This was not totally unexpected...

Q: Did the phone service operate all during this time?

JONES: It operated very well.

Q: So you could keep in touch with the Embassy.

JONES: That's exactly what happened. The firing started around 4:30-5:00 AM. I was on the phone to the Embassy. Ridgway Knight, who was then Consul General [in Damascus], managed to make it from his residence to the Consulate General in two or three minutes. So I told Knight that there was heavy firing outside, the old French "Staghound" cars...

Q: You mean French-made armored cars.

JONES: Armored cars, right, as far as we could tell. We were in a basement apartment and we could see out of the narrow windows.

Q: So you had pretty good protection. You were sort of under ground.

JONES: They were not shooting at our residence in any case. They were shooting at Amer's residence. So I was able to keep Knight roughly informed about what was happening. I said, "Obviously, it's an attack on Amer's residence." At that time I had no idea of the extent of the insurrection. But, as it turned out, that was all they had to do. There were no major Egyptian troop elements in Syria. Therefore, throwing Egyptian rule off was no problem whatsoever.

Q: I suppose that Nasser could have sent troops to Latakia to try to affect the outcome. I gather that he decided not to do that.

JONES: He decided not to. Militarily, it would have been extremely difficult, particularly if Israel, which sat between the two regions [of the UAR] had decided to obstruct [such a movement of Egyptian troops] in some way. So Nasser decided that the Syrian-Egyptian union was over, even though Egypt continued to call itself the UAR for a few more years.

Q: Didn't Syria and Egypt get together again for another version of the UAR?

JONES: They kept talking about it, but it never actually happened.

Q: Now one other thing that we didn't touch on is that, in July, 1958, as I recall, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown. Did that have an impact on you at all?

JONES: Yes, but only in a sense. We talked to some of the Syrians who were trapped in Baghdad at the time of the overthrow. That was another bloody, frenzied affair, like the affair in Alexandria in January, 1952. A number of people died. Several of the Syrian [diplomats], even though they were Arabs, left in fear of their lives. This was when Nuri Said [the Prime Minister of Iraq at the time] dressed himself as a woman and attempted to flee. As I recall, King Faisal [the king of Iraq] was killed.

Q: Yes, that's right. Wasn't this the initial appearance of the Ba'ath Socialist Party as the party in power?

JONES: The party which took over in Baghdad was a coalition of two or three parties, in which the Ba'ath evolved as the leader. Abd al-Salaam 'Aref, was the original figurehead [leader] in Iraq. He didn't last too long. Eventually, our "friend," Saddam Hussein, became influential behind the scenes, even that far back, I believe.

Q: Did the events in Iraq have any impact on the situation in Syria?

JONES: Not really. Syrian politics after World War II and until the union with Egypt were essentially a function of Iraqi-Egyptian rivalry. Syrian governments seemed to alternate between pro-Iraqi and pro-Egyptian regimes. The situation oscillated in that way until the union with Egypt, which was in effect for three or four years. The overthrow of the "Intifada al Mubarakah", as the Syrians called it, was not a total surprise to the Embassy, because various straws had

appeared in the wind. We had sent a cable to Washington two or three weeks [prior to the event], saying that conditions were ripe for an ouster of the Egyptians. After the Egyptians were thrown out, Syria became an independent country once again. The Syrian faction of the Ba'ath gradually reestablished control, even though the term "Ba'ath" [Socialist Resurrectionist Party] became less and less meaningful as a classification. For example, Hafiz al-Assad, the present dictator of Syria, came to power through the Ba'ath, but he's a very different person than Saddam Hussein, the present dictator of Iraq, who also came up with the Ba'ath. Assad is a member of the Alawite faction in Syria.

The Ba'ath was originally devised by two leading theoreticians, Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar, Aflaq being Greek Orthodox and Bitar being a Sunni Muslim. So what the Ba'ath is depends on who is waving the flag at the time. In 1962 Ralph Barrow was the Officer in Charge of Syrian-Egyptian Affairs--they were still kept together in NEA, even though the UAR no longer existed. I went back [to Washington] to be his deputy.

Q: How did that assignment come about? Was this negotiated or did it come as a surprise?

JONES: I suspect that Bob Strong and Ridgway Knight were looking toward an eventual replacement for Barrow. I had no [advance] knowledge of this [assignment] whatsoever...

Q: So they didn't discuss it with you.

JONES: No, they didn't discuss it with me at all. I just suspect that they said, "Well, Jones looks like a logical replacement for Barrow. Barrow is due to go out [to the field soon]." I went back as his deputy, replaced him a year later, and Barrow went out as Consul General to Aleppo.

Q: So you were in Washington on the Syrian desk from...

JONES: 1962 to 1965. I was deputy for a year and then was Officer in Charge of Egyptian-Syrian Affairs. Immediately, my primary concern shifted from Syria to Egypt, because the cornerstone of American policy in the Middle East, insofar as the Arabs were concerned, was cooperation with Egypt. That cooperation was based on [the shipment of] PL 480 [surplus agricultural commodities], that is, the supply of wheat to Egypt on very benevolent terms. This was Bob Strong's favorite policy. He was the "champion" of PL 480 [commodities] for Egypt and doing business with Nasser.

DAVID NALLE
Cultural Affairs Officer
Damascus (1958-1960)

Mr. Nalle was brought up in Philadelphia before attending Princeton, where he received a BA in English Literature. He joined the International Information Administration (later USIA) in 1951 and was sent to Afghanistan. Mr. Nalle also

served in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Soviet Union. Mr. Nalle was interviewed by Dorothy Robins-Mowry on April 12, 1990.

NALLE: So to speak, yes. Actually, as far as liveable cities, I guess I was moving upwards, because Damascus at that time was a very attractive city. This was in the period when Damascus and Egypt were allied in the United Arab Republic. It was one of the few periods of tranquility in Syrian history before Hafez al-Assad took over. It was a very interesting city, not particularly hospitable to Americans, and certainly not to American policy, but there again, because of the fact that I was cultural, the CAO, there, more than anybody in the embassy, I think, I had access to the community. We made some very good friends there and did, I think, some useful things. But there again, as had been true in Iran in a rather subterranean, buried way, you were working in a society where the natural bent of the young and intellectually aware people was to be anti-American.

Q: Why is this so?

NALLE: Because, in Iran, we were the new colonial power taking the place of the British, in effect, and as became much more pronounced later, we were insulting the masculinity, the national dignity, whatever, of the Iranian people by showing them what to do, giving them money to do it, telling them how to do it, and so forth. Of course, there was a different cause in Damascus: it was the Arab-Israeli situation and our policy towards Israel, which made it very difficult for the ordinary politically oriented Syrian to be friendly with us. But there again, if one could use the excuse of culture, one could deal with the Americans.

We had a library and cultural center there in Damascus, which did very well. We had a lot of nervous moments when some new American policy initiatives favored Israel and students would begin to demonstrate. I think they attacked the center once while I was there. But we had a full-scale program and published books in Arabic, put on cultural presentations. At that time, the Agency was sending out a fair number of cultural activities and visitors, and we were beginning to get professors at Damascus University, which was something I started while I was there. The Agency never did send me to study Arabic, which was unfortunate, but I did speak French, and that worked in Damascus at the university.

Q: But it was the French that you had before you went into the service.

NALLE: Yes.

Q: How much of a staff was there then in Damascus, USIA staff?

NALLE: PAO and CAO.

Q: That's all? Just the two of you?

NALLE: And secretary.

Q: Who was the PAO?

NALLE: Bob Lincoln was both PAO and CAO when I got there, and then after a while, Don Shea came to be PAO.

Q: In Damascus, after all, you're in a capital city and the home of the embassy and so forth. Of course, that was true in Kabul, too. But you still had a great deal of freedom in what you did and what you decided to do and this kind of thing?

NALLE: Yes, except the constraints were much more apparent in the Syrian context.

Q: That's because of policy problems?

NALLE: Yes. We really were very careful about what you did and even where you went.

Q: can you remember any examples of this?

NALLE: I remember when we got there, we were put up in the Omayyad Hotel, which was one of two first-class hotels then. After we'd been there a day or two, we got a note from the ambassador. He had not called us or said anything to us, because the Omayyad Hotel was assumed to be bugged. The note said, "We think you should move up to the residence." Actually, he wasn't ambassador; he was still consul general because Syria was in the union with Egypt.

Q: Who was this?

NALLE: Parker T. Hart. He would have been the ambassador, except for the union. He was consul general and very good, an Arabist. So we did move up to the residence, very comfortable. We arrived there on July the Fourth and the Marines landed in Beirut on July 14th, I believe, in reaction to the overthrow of the King in Baghdad, in Iraq. So it was a time of great turmoil and worry about what the reaction of the mob would be, so to speak, to these adverse developments. I guess the consul general knew about the forthcoming landing. That was one reason we had to move to a safer place.

But the day of the landing, I forget who it was, somebody in the embassy had scheduled a big reception to greet the new cultural attaché and his wife. We went to the party without knowing about the landing. The Syrians had been listening to the radio and they all knew about the landing, except for this one fellow, whom I've since seen here in the States, who had been on a picnic. He came. He was the only Syrian who came to the reception.

I remember the Italian chargé d'affaires. We stood in the front room on the street side of this apartment, waiting in line to greet all the many Syrians who were going to come in, and the Italian chargé came up to us and said, "You shouldn't stand here. Come with me." We went back into the dining room, and the dining room was full of people, foreign diplomats, because it was away from the street. They all were brave enough to come but savvy enough to expect that if there was a bomb going to be thrown, it would be thrown in the front window and everybody in the front room would be demolished. Fortunately, no bomb was thrown.

Q: It did not happen?

NALLE: But it was interesting that that room was empty and the dining room was chock-a-block with people.

Q: There's something about the antennae of people who live in these situations, not just the nationals, but I mean anybody who's living there, if they've got any experience. I'm not talking about people who might be brand new. But where to go and what to do. This reminds me of when things were going all wrong in Iran in '78 and '79, and we had the American Studies Conference. The University in Shiraz moved the entire conference into an inner set of rooms, because there was fighting between the students and the police. Exactly the same kind of thing.

NALLE: The Arab world at that time was very much of a radio civilization and may still be. But all the Syrians would have been listening to two or three radio broadcasts during all of the day.

Q: Was the BBC functioning, also?

NALLE: Yes, BBC and VOA. They would all listen to one of those. They'd listen to a local station to find out what the line was. Damascus radio probably would not have broadcast that there had been a landing. They all listened to Radio Israel so they would have--

Q: All points of view.

NALLE: Yes. Out of that, they would get the real story.

Q: The program that you carried out, obviously there was a library and you had speakers. Was the library attacked while you were there in Damascus?

NALLE: I can't remember. I don't think so, actually. It wasn't seriously attacked. I think we had to close down at various times to avoid it. I don't think we were physically attacked.

Q: So this was your first real encounter with policy problems of the Arab world and the Israeli world, I take it.

NALLE: Yes.

Q: The others had been a different set of obligations. What kind of living conditions did you have after you moved out of the residence?

NALLE: We had a lovely apartment in a relatively new section of Damascus. Damascus also has a wonderful climate. At that time it was a lovely city; now I guess it's vastly overgrown. It was famous in the Middle East for its gardens around the outside of the city, and the old city; they call it the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

Q: Did you get to travel around very much in the country, or did you focus within Damascus?

NALLE: We traveled some, because Aleppo related to Damascus the way New York relates to--or used to--Washington. Aleppo was a large city and the Aleppans felt they were more cultured. That's no longer anywhere near true, but there was some justification for it then. We did do programs in Aleppo and towns in between, but there wasn't much except Damascus and Aleppo.

Q: How did your new wife like the Foreign Service?

NALLE: Very much, I think, even though it was quite different from her previous professional life. Peggy's a very good bridge player, and that was a useful way to meet a certain important class of Syrians. Peggy also spoke French. We did that, played bridge quite often. It was a pleasant place to live. Our first child, David, was born there--actually not in Damascus, but in Beirut.

Q: While you were stationed in Damascus?

NALLE: While we were stationed there. Our pediatrician in Damascus said, "My basic advice to you is don't have your child here. Have it in Beirut." So we did that.

Q: Of course, at that time, Beirut was a fine city with great cosmopolitan--

NALLE: Oh, indeed. Wonderful place. That's where one went for R&R. It was interesting to me, in retrospect, when you went from Syria to Lebanon and you crossed the border, you had this wonderful feeling of release, that you were suddenly free and unobserved and just like anybody anywhere, after you'd been conscious all the time in Damascus of people watching you. We used to have in Damascus, when we'd give a reception, one person at least who would come who wasn't invited. They often came in black turtlenecks, and they would stand in the corner. They would look at your guests. It put a certain damper on the conversation. But what I started to say was that, in retrospect, the feeling of going from Syria to Lebanon was exactly what you had when you went from Moscow to Helsinki. Once you left and got on the airplane to leave Moscow, you suddenly felt as if a great weight had been taken off the top of your head and you were going back to the normal way of life, where you weren't watched all the time.

Q: I felt that myself after taking a tour around the Soviet Union in 1959. We were in the Soviet Union for three weeks. We landed in Warsaw, and I started to negotiate with the Poles, which was required, and it was the same thing. I am so interested that you used that phrase. It was like a physical weight being lifted from one's shoulders somehow. I wonder what this means when you have to live in this society with no hope of getting out, the implications of this.

NALLE: It's kind of sad. I remember being on one plane leaving Moscow, and as soon as the wheels left the ground, spontaneously everybody in the plane started to applaud. I thought, "What must the Soviets think?" [Laughter] All these people applaud the leaving of the Soviet Union.

Q: They did that out of Iran, too, when things were really critical.

NALLE: Of course.

Q: Once the wheels were up. Have you got anything else that you'd like to tell us about your stint there in Damascus? Anything unusual? Any changes that seem to be occurring? Was the policy focus all concerned with the Israeli-Arab situation? You had all that AID experience earlier. What was the heavy focus?

NALLE: To do business, you had to talk first about the failures and the faults of American policy. You had to listen to that, and you had to say, "Well, there's some merit to what you say." Then you put that aside. I think one's interlocutor did the same thing. You had to address that. You had to acknowledge that problem in our relationship. Then you talked about your business. Then we did very useful things. We brought, as I said, the first group of--I think it was four professors from American universities, who came and worked in Damascus University. They, again, as I was in Meshed, were directly in contact with these students, having set aside the policy problem. They formed wonderful friendships and relationships with these people, and also taught them something at the same time.

I suppose our real triumph in Damascus was putting on the American booth at the Damascus International Fair. I meet people occasionally who still remember it. The Agency initially declined to fund it, and the Syrians were really insulted, because the Syrians, certainly then and for some time afterwards, were really oriented towards America. They had nothing in common with the Soviets. They really don't like other Arabs, and they looked toward America. There were lots of Syrian Americans, obviously, and lots of contacts. So the Syrians, I think, persuaded the consul general that we really should do something, so we got, I remember, \$11,000. That's all we had to put this thing on. We sort of built it by hand with the help of a very generous Armenian contractor who did most of it free, and we put this thing together in something like six weeks.

We got some things like a Polaroid camera and a solar energy exhibit that happened to be wandering around the world from the Agency, and we made up a lot of things around it locally. Streams of people came in. Of course, the Soviets were there with an enormous exhibit of tractors and Sputniks and things like that. We had the most people. We had an American restaurant there with hamburgers and things like that, cooked by--at least the cooks were taught by the American community, how to make hamburgers and hot dogs. We dressed it up just the way a Burger King would be here.

Q: Shades of McDonald's in Moscow.

NALLE: Yes. Then with a solar cooker from the solar energy exhibit, Peggy would prepare each day batter for making 1,000 chocolate chip cookies. So our car smelled forever after of chocolate chip cookie batter, because every day we'd drive down to the fairgrounds with a car full of these pans of batter. But it was a tremendous success. I would take Polaroid pictures of the people and hand them out. Peggy would hand them chocolate chip cookies. It was a Mom and Pop operation, but tremendously successful.

Q: That's a great experience when you think of how many thousands of dollars now go into these fairs that go on.

NALLE: Yes.

JOHN H. KEAN
USAID, Officer in Charge of Egypt, Syria (United Arab Republic) and Sudan
Washington DC (1958-1960)

John H. Kean was born in Saskatchewan, Canada in 1921. He attended George Washington University, receiving an A.B. degree in 1943 and a M.A. degree in 1947. Mr. Kean worked in the Department of Commerce from 1943 to 1952, whence he joined the Foreign Service. Mr. Kean's overseas career included posts in Turkey, Egypt, Ghana, and Swaziland. He was interviewed by W. Haven North in 1994.

Q: Then you came back to Washington for a couple of years, and took on Egypt and Syria. Boy! you take on all these big ones, don't you?

KEAN: Yes. I got a hint from General Riley a couple of months before I was to return to Washington that that was going to be my fate, and that surprised me a little bit, because I had been to Egypt in 1955 on this familiarization trip in relation to Israel and then just before I learned that I was going to be working on Egypt and other countries, we made a tourist trip from Turkey during the Easter vacation to Egypt and Jordan and Lebanon. So back I went to Washington to take on what was then the UAR, the United Arab Republic which was Syria and Egypt joined in a union, a rather tenuous relationship. Sudan which was then administered as a part of the NESAB Bureau (Near East South Asia Bureau) was also part of my responsibility from 1958 to '60. During this time, I did make one trip to the Sudan and a somewhat incidental stop in Egypt.

Q: You were still in the Foreign Service?

KEAN: No, I actually went back into the Civil Service, because my assignment in Turkey was a temporary Foreign Service assignment as a staff officer.

Q: Then you took on the UAR and the Sudan?

KEAN: Yes, at the time that I arrived on the scene to work on Egypt we had just reopened the Mission following the break in diplomatic relations and the withdrawal of the assistance program in Egypt at the time of the 1956 Suez war. So we were just beginning and making initial plans to resume programs that had been going on and perhaps most critically to extend PL 480 assistance to Egypt. We had really no program going in Syria. The relationship between the U.S. and Syria had always been quite tenuous so as things began to pick up in relationships with the then UAR, we were really only beginning a program in Egypt and continuing a program in the Sudan which

had begun at about the time Sudan became independent in 1956. It's hard to say where the greatest focus of attention was. With a going program in the Sudan and a very activist Mission Director, named Bob Kitchen in the Sudan, the level of communications initially when I came on the scene was certainly more active vis-a-vis Khartoum than with Egypt, but it was also apparent that in terms of the potential importance of the countries Egypt and Syria had the greater demand on our time. With the small staff that we had, we were going to have to focus on Egypt primarily over the long pull.

Q: What was the scale of our program at that time?

KEAN: Well, it was next to zero in the summer of 1958. We were feeling our way back into a new relationship with Egypt as anyone knowing the time period would be aware. Not only had the Suez war interrupted our relationship but the Suez war grew out of the U.S. decision not to finance the high dam at Aswan.

Q: The Suez war grew out of that decision?

KEAN: Yes, the Suez war was indirectly, at least, in part if not in large part, a result of the western decision, U.K., U.S. and World Bank decision not to finance the high dam because Egypt, in 1955, decided, to a degree, to throw in its lot with the Soviets and in September 1955 sign the Czech arms deal in which they bought massive quantities of Czech and (and to a lesser degree Soviet) military equipment and began to negotiate with the Soviets for the financing and construction of the high dam at Aswan. So the whole western relationship with Egypt (which had been quite active in the period after the 1952 revolution though strained at the same time), had to be rebuilt. The strain, of course, derived from the Cold War as well as the U.S. relationship with Israel. Egypt, as an Arab country, resented the tremendous support that was being extended to Israel. So it was a break of massive proportions in 1956 which was only being slowly healed as we began to try to rebuild a relationship with Egypt for broad geopolitical reasons even though it was fairly clear that Nasser had thrown in his lot to a very substantial degree with the Soviets by entering into the arms deal. Now, the U.S. had had a quite substantial and very broad-based technical assistance program in Egypt from the period 1952-1956.

One of the major undertakings that the U.S. had entered into during that period was to set up a project in 1953 as a binational fund which was unique for the Near East. It was called the Egyptian American Rural Improvement Service, EARIS. That went forward in the planning and early development stages for reclamation of a fairly substantial chunk of land, several hundred fedans or acres in the lower delta next to Alexandria, which was being reclaimed from Lake Maryut and two smaller pieces of land out in the Fayoum Depression, south and west of Cairo. The model for this administrative structure was borrowed from Latin America. At least nominally, the Ambassador (for the U.S.) and the Egyptian Minister of Agriculture were the co-directors of this joint fund. The work on the reclamation activity, which that program was designed to carry out, had been drastically slowed down but hadn't fully stopped during the period of the Suez war and the following year and a half when the U.S. no longer had a Mission there and for some period didn't have diplomatic representation in Cairo. The first thing that was done was to revive that program and resume the suspended activity for which funds were already in place. This was a fairly easy thing to do. So that was the first activity that was undertaken as

assistance resumed.

The Mission was opened with a few key personnel in mid-1958 under the direction of Ross Whitman (who was also Counselor of Embassy for Economic Affairs.) To reactivate EARIS a small staff, which initially included Horace Holmes ("Mr. Point Four" from India) was sent to Cairo. He and Paul Kime and Al Lackey and a secretary were sent as the people to administer the revival of this activity. It was in early 1959 when that group went to Egypt and opened up this technical assistance activity. The land reclamation part was pretty largely in the hands of the Egyptians and had gone forward during the hiatus. We didn't have technical people there primarily concerned with reclamation. They were mainly focused on planning for the resettlement component of the program, which meant the design of villages, the development of the village facilities and the services that should be provided and working out the concepts that would underlie this resettlement process. The resettlement really means bringing people from other villages in the delta to settle this new land.

Q: Why were they doing that?

KEAN: There was steadily growing pressure on, and demand for, land as population increased. The Government was anxious to show that it was meeting that need and the U.S. found it politically desirable to cooperate. A large block of funds was committed to this project in 1953 as the last act in Egypt of the Point Four program before it was consolidated into FOA. Lake Mariyut was one of the best areas for reclamation in the country. It was at the level of the Nile, not up on a bench land, and it was an area that had been flooded. Lake Mariyut was the area that was being drained for reclamation, and somewhat fortuitously it turned out that this was some of the best land around. It had a great deal of calcareous material from the sea bed that had been there before the delta was built up and with a certain amount of leaching to get the salt and alkali out of the land, it turned out that it was very rich. So it was a very fortunate place to undertake this program and it did well in future times as people got onto that land.

Q: Was this because of overpopulation or did people have to move for other reasons?

KEAN: Well, the key issue in Egypt, of course, is land. The rapidly growing population already meant too many people per acre to productively employ them in agriculture and there were few alternatives. People were therefore selected from some of the most crowded villages in the delta. Young families were the preferred group for the resettlement. This was the next step.

There's a lot of fiction in the whole notion of the joint fund arrangement. The Egyptians regarded EARIS as their project. They thought of this jointness as strictly window-dressing. As far as they were concerned, we were welcome to come and meddle in their business to the extent of providing technical assistance but the rest of it, the joint jurisdiction was something they never acknowledged de facto, even though they acknowledged it de jure: but "we went through the motions". We occasionally held these formal meetings between the Ambassador and the Minister to ratify something or sign an agreement but the ordinary day-to-day activities were carried on by the Mission Director. As the Mission was opened, the Economic Counselor of the Embassy was made the Mission Director, so you had it integrated at the head between the Embassy and the Mission, and that's the way it existed for quite a long time there all the way through all of my

association with Egypt which then ran for nearly eight years.

So we are beginning something which is a major chunk of my career. Except for a period of seven months when I was in Pakistan in 1960 to early '61, I was in some measure associated with and concerned with Egypt either in Washington or in Cairo for the whole period from 1958 to 1966. There were periods when my major attention was focused on other things and I was only partially concerned with Egypt. Nevertheless, during all of that period except for the time in Pakistan I had some reason to be concerned with Egypt. As I said, I visited the Sudan in 1959 for about six weeks and then spent ten days in Egypt and had some opportunity to become acquainted on the ground with the situation in both of those countries. I did not go to Syria at that time because we really didn't have anything going there.

Over the next 16 or so months, while I was working on Egypt in Washington, we continued to gradually expand the program. A presentation was made in Washington late in 1958 about a set of things we might undertake to do in Egypt. That was included in the Congressional Presentation for the 1960 fiscal year and so with the beginning of fiscal 1960 we began to expand and increase our involvement. This was a response to the gradually thawing political relations between the countries and a deliberate effort to try to expand our relationships with Egypt. This was a counterbalance to the expanding Soviet involvement there. With the beginning of construction of the high dam in 1958 the Soviet presence became very significant. Throughout my whole time of involvement we were in a sort of head-to-head struggle against the Russian penetration of Egypt. It wasn't as direct as I've seen it in other countries (e.g. Afghanistan) but it was still intense. Clearly the U.S. and the Soviet Union were striving for influence there and so our involvement reflected that.

Our activities in the first year or two included EARIS and a few other activities but mainly the beginning of a program in the western desert to explore the feasibility of large-scale development of deep wells in the oases of the western desert (Karga, Dahkla and Farafara). From ancient times these oases had been a site of civilization. There is evidence that at one point there were as many as a million people living out there. They depended on shallow wells, but President Nasser had the conviction that there was a potential for large scale development again using deep-well water. So we sent a USGS team out there to drill test wells to determine the feasibility of development along those lines. That program went on for several years, and later when I was living in Egypt we continued to be deeply involved in that program. It proved to be not such a potential bonanza, although there was a lot of fossil water there which had been deposited geologically eons ago and under artesian pressure. Once the wells were punched, the water would begin spouting fifty feet into the air, but within a year or so the level of pressure declined. Then you would have to sink a slotted tube in the ground and install a pump to continue to draw water. Obviously there was a very slow rate of recharge and you would end up with an inverted cone of the water table in this geological formation where the inflow to the point of the well was relatively slow. You had only a limited supply of water that would not last indefinitely into the future. If pumped at a high rate, you would pretty soon exhaust the supply. Hence, it wasn't going to be a place to settle large numbers of people. That would have been great news for Egypt to have a place to resettle its growing population that was doubling every 23 years and rapidly outrunning the resources of the Nile River and the Nile Valley.

We also put in place a more general agricultural program which aimed to support the Ministry of Agriculture in providing improved research and extension systems. This was not a new activity. There had been similar programs before the 1956 expulsion of the Mission, but I think it's fair to say that the Egyptians were somewhat reluctant participants in this program. They weren't really ready to acknowledge that foreigners had a lot to teach them. They felt that they already had a high-yielding agricultural system. It was a system that had evolved over a period of many decades. They knew how to run it, it was highly dependent on the irrigation system and the system of crop rotation which had also evolved over many decades.

We did send people abroad for training and that had its political as well as its development dimension in terms of having an ever-larger pool of people in that country who had western connections. From the time of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt on through the 19th century and then with the British and to some extent with French and Germans there was a lot of western orientation and western culture and western ties in Egypt, but they had an ambivalent feeling: "Yes, we are sort of western, but we are not really western; we're really Arabs, Muslims, middle Easterners; we're really people who have our own culture and our own future and we are not sure we want to be associated with these people who are too close to Israel anyway." That was basically the nature of the attitude that existed and formed the tenuous basis of our relationship.

ROBERT S. DILLON
Economic Officer Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs
Washington, DC (1959-1960)

Ambassador Robert S. Dillon was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1929. He received a bachelor's degree from Duke University in 1951 and joined the State Department in 1956. In addition to serving as ambassador to Lebanon, his career included positions in Venezuela, Turkey, Malaysia, and Egypt. Ambassador Dillon was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: How did you view the Syrians in this period?

DILLON: The Syrians loomed very large in our eyes. The Syrian activities in Lebanon were aimed mainly at bolstering their position. The Syrians were in Beirut; they were on the road between Beirut and Chtoura; they were in the Bekaa Valley. They were not in southern Lebanon where the Israelis had declared a "red line" that the Syrians respected. The Syrians were not in the major part of northern Lebanon, but they had some presence in areas controlled by Franjieh. The Syrian army, in a sense, behaved correctly. Undoubtedly, someone will come up with horror stories about the Syrians, but on the most part they behaved correctly except for occasional looting. The Syrians did sponsor militia groups, one of which was named the "Red Tigers". They behaved badly; they were thugs who carried out acts of violence on behalf of the Syrians. The other group was the PLA (Palestinian Liberation Army) which some people confused with the PLO, although they were entirely different. The PLA were Palestinian units which were organized by the Syrians and were completely under Syrian control. They were not part of the PLO. Someone described them as the "dregs of the camps."

All the petty rackets, all the thieving was done by these groups. The Syrians were great looters. When it comes to looting, these armies and groups were absolutely shameless. The Israelis were the same; they and the Syrians would take anything they could. They would fill truck loads; it was all well organized. They would go through houses and strip them bare and ship the goods off to Syria or Israel. They were both absolutely shameless. The only difference was that in the Syrian case, their officers were directly engaged in this looting while in the Israeli case, their officers tolerated it. They turned their backs and had no sense of responsibilities. The Israeli army had lousy discipline. The myth of the new Prussians is wrong. It may be that in certain combat situations the lack of discipline is good in the sense that you get greater risk taking and more initiative by junior officers, but in other situations the lack of discipline is bad. They casually kill a lot of people in a place like Lebanon. There is no fire discipline, no attempt to really control their troops. The troops loot; they are slovenly; they aren't very impressive when you are living cheek-to-jowl with them.

The Syrians were engaged in stealing in Lebanon. There were Syrian officers who, I was told, were very concerned about the damage this looting was doing to their own army. I am not suggesting that they were nice guys, but that they apparently were concerned with what happens to a military organization when it becomes corrupted by stealing.

I was told that there were Syrian officers who felt the Syrian Army should leave Lebanon to save itself. Its presence in Lebanon allowed them to steal and loot. Life is different and looser in Lebanon; there are women available in Lebanon who are not available in Syria. All of these factors matter. As in some American occupations, there is an incentive for troops to stay in occupied territory. After all, Syria is a fairly austere society--heavily Muslim. For the Syrian troops, therefore, a tour in Lebanon, with its very limited restraints, was an opportunity in a lot of ways and some of the troops enjoyed their stay. They certainly didn't cover themselves with glory.

We had liaison with the Syrians through a Lebanese officer, Sami Khatib, who is still around. He was then a brigadier general; he probably has another star or two by now. The Syrians were in Lebanon as a peace-keeping force. We didn't directly talk to Syrian officers, who were obviously under orders to avoid Americans. So we dealt through the Lebanese middle-man which for many purposes was quite effective. Sami Khatib was not a boob. He was effective on many things.

The PLA tried to kill our Army Attaché, whom I liked a lot. He was on his way to my house in a jeep; he had to cross a check-point controlled by the PLA. There they opened fire on him, knowing full well who he was. He was wounded even though the armored wind-shield held up. A couple of bullets came through a side window and grazed his head. It was not a serious wound, but he did have blood all over his face. He drove to the hospital and then to my house and I went out to look at the jeep. There were bullet marks all over the jeep. It was clear that there had been an assassination attempt. I got so angry about this that I jumped into my car and went straight to Syrian headquarters because they controlled the PLA. They seemed astounded. Here was the American Ambassador walking into Syrian headquarters demanding to see the commander. He couldn't be found, but the Syrians were obviously disconcerted. I wanted to confront him while I was still angry although I am not sure what I would have done. I stayed in the headquarters for

fifteen-twenty minutes. It was obviously a foolish gesture, but I was so irate that I didn't really stop to think. The Army Attaché stayed at our house for a few days recuperating. But I will never forget the sight of that shot-up jeep, which was well known in Beirut and could not have been mistaken for another one. I don't know why the PLA shot. Maybe it was a personal matter, maybe someone just felt like shooting at an American. Who knows?

Q: Did we have relationships with Syria at the time?

DILLON: Yes. Bob Paganelli, a very good officer, was our Ambassador.

PHILIP W. IRELAND
Economic Officer
Aleppo (1959-1961)

Philip W. Ireland was born in Iowa in 1904. He graduated from Oxford University with a B.A. in 1933 and a M.A. in 1937. He received a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics in 1936. Before joining the Foreign Service, he was a professor at the American University in Beirut and the University of Chicago. His career included posts in Egypt, Iraq, Greece, and Syria. Mr. Ireland was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: Then you were transferred to Aleppo. How did that transfer come along?

IRELAND: One of the CIA in Aleppo offered one of the Greeks in the military attaché's office \$10,000 for the minutes of the last meeting. The man was insulted and went in and told what the American had said and the Syrians kicked all the Americans out of Syria. Aleppo has an interesting history and a lot of Chinese. I had been in Beirut between 1925 and 1928 and used to go up to Aleppo--a very attractive city. The Italians were there. There was one family consul for 7 countries. Somebody came along at the end and said he had the press sheets bound and asked if I was interested. He couldn't afford to give them to me and asked for \$200. I gave him \$200 and eventually gave them to (inaudible) State Library. Fascinating.

Q: What were your major concerns when you were in Aleppo? What were you doing?

IRELAND: I was really trying to make friends for the United States and wipe out the fact that all of us were CIA persons. They were their only to get military information. There again, I found that visits out to areas as far over as the Kurd's country and right over to the corner towards Mosul. That was I think my main contribution because we did, after Aleppo had been open a few months, we had the embassy.

Q: We have gone through the United Arab Republic and then...

IRELAND: Oh, yes that was the time I was there. That was an attempt to put Syria in the big nation class. I was there then, but I didn't really have much contact with it.

Q: How did you find the Syria officials. Were they avoiding you because of the CIA...?

IRELAND: No, they didn't. My wife speaks good Arabic and she took the ladies on and did a bang up job. They came voluntarily. They would call her and say they had an hour or two before picking up their husbands and was she busy? The men would invite me to their Kiwanis club. That was interesting. I was invited locally pretty well around until later. I left home and an old colleague of mine came up--two of them, one who had been in the same office in Washington and then another one. During the one from Washington they started to burn the embassy and our people had to go down the rope the back way.

Q: This was while you were there?

IRELAND: No. I was away. This man had been with me on the Syrian section of the Department of State.

Q: But while you were there relations were on relatively smooth basis.

IRELAND: Yes. We got out into the country. An Arab can be friendly and he can also be very, very smart and ask you the questions that I wanted to ask him. So he got an idea of what was going on elsewhere. Among the bedouin it was interesting because the consul general had never been able to get to them. The Department was pleased.

Q: How did we feel at that time about the Soviets and Syria? Was this a major problem yet?

IRELAND: If they did, they were very good about it. I was also close to the Syrian section of the United Nations Organization. I had the five--Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. I served a good deal in them and many of the people on the board were friends of mine. I got invited out not only for dinner but they took pictures of me when I turned up at one of their parties.

RICHARD A. DWYER
Economic/Commercial Officer
Damascus (1960-1963)

Richard A. Dwyer was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1933. He completed an A.B. degree at Dartmouth College in 1955, and then earned an M.A. degree in Public Affairs at Princeton University in 1957. After college, he went directly into the Foreign Service. Mr. Dwyer's overseas career included posts in Syria, Egypt, Bulgaria, Chad, Guyana, and Martinique. He was interviewed by Professor Charles Stuart Kennedy on July 12, 1990.

Q: Well, your first overseas assignment was to Damascus in 1960 where you served until 1963.

DWYER: Yes.

Q: How did that come about?

DWYER: Well, inadvertently, I must say. There was a brief assignment between. I had a chance to work on the Antarctic Treaty program for the duration of the Antarctic Treaty until early 1960. It was very interesting. One of the few real world treaty conferences that wasn't under the auspice of the United Nations and it was a great experience.

I had naively requested a French speaking post. Personnel decided that Saigon would be a nice place for me. I was not too keen on Saigon and to my surprise they came up with Damascus which never entered my mind. I was thinking of Algeria or Morocco. They needed someone in Damascus badly because my predecessor had resigned mid-tour and went home so it was one of those things that if you can go tomorrow you can have it. So, we left.

Q: What was the situation in Syria at that time? We are talking about the early 1960s.

DWYER: Syria at that time was still part of the United Arab Republic which consisted of Syria and Egypt. I can't recall now, but at one point there was Yemen in there.

Q: It was always coming in and out.

DWYER: Yes, yes, they were sewing stars on the flag and taking them off. In fact it was a fascinating time to be there. A year after we got there on September 28, 1961, as I recall, the Syrians in effect revolted and Syria became an independent country again. For a period of another year and a half or so, Syria had a more or less democratic government for the last time since the Ba'aths took over in 1963. So you had, unfortunately a series of governments that were trying to find their way, but for a junior officer on a first assignment this country was a great place to be. You knew people. As a third secretary I had friends in the cabinet, almost unheard of in other countries at that level. Of course the cabinet kept changing all the time, so sooner or later you knew most everybody.

Q: I assume this was a fairly small embassy.

DWYER: Yes, it was. When I arrived it was a consulate general which it had become upon the union of Syria and Egypt. We had a consulate general in Damascus which had formerly been the embassy and another consulate general in Aleppo. The staff in Damascus included myself, the junior officer as economic/commercial officer, three or four political officers, a couple of which were with the Agency, a consular section and administrative section, and a small AID group plus a military attaché office.

Q: How did you find the hand of Egypt at that time? There was this sort of peculiar union at the height of Nasserism and all that, but what was the consulate general's impression of this union?

DWYER: Well, it was still getting it's feet on the ground and it still was not working. The vice president, General Omer [ph], was an Egyptian and he was rather the viceroy. As a matter of fact

he lived across the street from us which was the cause of everybody's car getting shot up but mine when the separation came. Basically the Syrians have been divided ethnically and geographically by the French under the mandate in the '20s and for quite a while before had never really had a country with real borders. The Ba'aths and the Ban [ph] Arabs considered greater Syria to run from the Nile over to Baghdad and most certainly including Beirut and all of Lebanon to say nothing of the lower part of Turkey that the French had given away in the '30s to make amends with the Turks. They had therefore the Druses in the south, the Alawites which the current President is from, and all kinds of minorities. The problem was that the most radical proposals drove out almost anything of any moderation. You could not be a Syrian politician at that time or probably even today and not be radically anti-Israeli, of course, because this would expose your party or group to the people who were even more radical. So therefore even though there were surprisingly many good people in the government--by good people I mean competent technicians that were looking towards the economic development of the country rather than the political aggrandizement of it--their voice was pretty much stifled through that whole period. After the country again became independent and in the interval, I must say, and after that we went through a dozen or eighteen coup d'etats and attempted coup d'etats, it was a regular occurrence, there were a succession of governments that never really managed to get a hold...

Q: This was after the ending of the....

DWYER: Yes, and even before there were a couple of bootleg attempts at coups that failed. I remember a birthday party at Les Polk's [ph] house...

Q: Les Polk being...?

DWYER: Les Polk was my immediate superior who became the senior economic/commercial officer after I had been there for a few months. Les was an Arabic specialist and spoke beautiful French. He had been in the army during the Second World War--a captain so he was a little older than the average. He was also a little unusual in that he was black--there were very few black officers in...

Q: He had been in Saudi Arabia before that...

DWYER: That is correct. He was quite a character. In any event, Les' eldest child had a birthday and was the same age as our girl, or a little older. So all the children were at that birthday party together with one of the grandmas visiting from the States when one of the coups came along. The standard procedure there was to gather the family--there were hardly any houses in Damascus as nearly everyone lived in apartments--and usually go into the kitchen since it was generally in the center of the apartment and there were fewer windows there. After the coup had been going for some time, the grandmother from the States told all the children that these were fireworks in connection with the child's birthday. I was one of the few who could get away easily from where I was and I dropped over to make sure that everybody was all right because we were immediately under curfew. My daughter came up to me and said, "Daddy, don't tell grandma X there is a coup on. She thinks it is for the birthday." I think I had the only 3 year old who could tell the difference between a 35mm and 50mm machine gun.

Q: Well now, what were American interests in Syria at that time?

DWYER: Well, they probably were pretty much the same as they are today. The political situation in some ways and indeed the environment has changed remarkably little over the odd years. Our primary client then as now was Israel. In the early '60s we could make, perhaps, a little bit more of a case that the United States was attempting to be neutral in Arab-Israeli affairs. Secondly, since the '56 war, there had been no French embassy in Damascus or British embassy there. And in the '60s still...

Q: The '56 war was the Suez Crisis.

DWYER: Suez Crisis, that's right. And in the '60s the French and British were still major players. As a matter of fact, certainly the French still are today. The French traditionally served as protector of Christian interests in Lebanon--all Syrians then and I suppose now still consider Lebanon as part of greater Syria. I think probably we were playing a little more of a role because of the absence of the French and the British until 1961 or 2, I forget when they came back. Beyond that we had the oil pipelines...

Q: Tapline.

DWYER: Tapline, precisely. It had been cut off by the first war of Israeli independence and there was still hopes at that time that that might be reopened. We had the same interests then as we do now. The hope is that Syria might itself be sufficiently stable so that it might play a stabilizing role in the area being the country where internationally as domestically the most radical government was the one that achieved popular support for a brief period. I refer to it as democratic governments, but they certainly were not democratic governments in any sense we knew or know now, but they were democratic in the sense that until the Ba'ath took over there was a kind of live and let live attitude toward political turmoil. If you were a colonel and didn't make brigadier you tried for president or prime minister and if missed, nothing too bad happened to you. Usually you were made military attaché somewhere depending on the quality of the coup you attempted. After the Ba'ath came in, particularly the hardline wing of the Ba'ath, you stood a pretty good chance of being stood against the wall and shot.

Q: When did the Ba'ath come in? Were you there at that time?

DWYER: Yes. It was in August of 1963. As a matter of fact we were growing suspicious, I think it may have been August 18 or 28, every coup seemed to happen on a date with an eight in it. Anyway it was about that time. After I left to go to Egypt, Assad finally achieved power as an Alawite and remarkably enough has stayed in power until today.

Q: Do you know or have a feel for how we viewed the Ba'ath party before they took over and at the time of the coup that brought them to power?

DWYER: Well, there were two major wings of the Ba'ath party--Oh, golly, I should have gone over all the names...

Q: Actually, we can add the names.

DWYER: The principal founder of the Ba'ath party fled to exile in Eastern Europe, I think Bulgaria, for quite a while. You had then the Ba'ath supported by the Iraqi Ba'ath party that had come in and these two wings of the Ba'ath party were different. I left Syria in the Fall of '63 so it was only a couple of months after the Ba'aths had come in. I don't think that we had any particular feeling for the Ba'ath as a whole, except generically. We didn't like radical socialists and we didn't like people who might come back to power from Eastern Europe. Beyond the coterie of Arabists in the State Department whose influence was not particularly great, I think, in the overall aspects of American foreign policy in those years, there wasn't much of anyone, I would guess, who knew much about them or cared greatly.

Q: You mentioned the Arabists in the Department of State in the '60s. You were not really from this particular world, I mean this was your first look at it. Was this a different breed of cat, I'm talking about the Foreign Service Officers who could be called Arabists?

DWYER: To some extent it was. The Arabists in the State Department are not in the same category as the British nomads of the desert to the people who fell in love with the Sheik to the south, although we had a few of those too. But basically the main thing, I suppose, that characterized the Arabists of that time was the fact that since the Suez War, the '56 war, there have been a large number of embassy and post closings and there were a lot of people with a great deal of time and career invested in the language and in the area who were looking for jobs. Beyond that, at the post itself, we really had only two or three people who would describe themselves as real Arabists. Curt Jones, the head of the political section, was certainly one of those. He spoke good Arabic, as the Arabs say, he speaks Arabic-like words. In the station there was one officer married to an Lebanese woman, whose Arabic was pretty good and...

Q: Was that Archie Roosevelt?

DWYER: No, Roosevelt was a few years before. As a matter of fact I occupied his office and the local employees always delighted in showing me where the Israelis strafed it. We still had a bullet mark or a fragmentation bomb, or something like that. Actually, Roosevelt's ties were not unknown and even then... We had a remarkably good military attaché whose name I can't think of at the moment, but he did more and better work as a military attaché than almost any one of the breed that I have encountered since. When I left Damascus and went over to Cairo, where we had a military attaché office of 60-odd people, and 27 accredited attachés, the whole bunch of them could not begin to turn out the work that the guy in Syria could with a sergeant and a lieutenant.

Q: What was the feeling towards Israel? The attitude of the Embassy and your attitude at that time. This was before our major commitment to Israel which came after the '67 war. But obviously they were our principal beneficiary in the Middle East, I suppose.

DWYER: I should say again that this was my first assignment, brand new right out of graduate school, not terribly sophisticated, and perhaps overly idealistic. I guess I should preface it by saying that I ended up spending three years there in my first assignment which from a career

standpoint was probably a mistake, but I had been asked to do so and as a result I had probably a better grasp of the community than most of the Embassy did who were changing at eighteen months and two years. I still thought at the time that we could still be even handed in our foreign policy. By even handed I mean that Israel would not be as much as a favored part of our foreign policy as it became.

I felt at the time and to some extent still do that if it were not for Israel, the Arabs would have had to invent one. It gave the disparate political and ethnic Arab groups something to unite against--about the only thing they had. My Arab friends, as an economic officer, were extremely shortsighted economically if they didn't have a fifty percent profit in six months they were not interested in it. But politically, even then, they remembered that the Kingdom of Jerusalem had lasted only a hundred years and the Arabs were patient and there were a great many more Arabs than Israelis and it might take another hundred years--mind you this was in the 1960s--but eventually that territory would become Arab once more.

I think that undoubtedly the refugee problem was the greatest difficulty. The Palestinians in Syria had been in refugee camps for 13 years or so and it is hard to believe they are still there today. But at that time in the '60s the Palestinians, as they were called and called themselves, in general were a more sophisticated, better educated group of people than the average Syrian. They were also, thanks to the British Mandate, more western-American-British oriented than the Syrians who had never been under the British Mandate. And they offered a pool of experience and talent that, unfortunately, was not used to the extent it might have been. Even now, looking back when I think of my Syrian or Palestinians friends, the entrepreneurs were Palestinians--the guy who built the match factory. Except for the traditional upper class Syrians, the middle and lower class Palestinians were probably better trained and educated. I presume that in the last 30 years that it has been largely dissipated now.

Q: I would imagine so. In the camps they wouldn't be getting the feed back.

DWYER: And most of them got out. I don't know if we ever could have put enough pressure on the Syrians and the other Arabs to assimilate the Palestinians. It was politically impossible, of course, because to do so would have meant that they accepted the state of Israel. Nonetheless, still I have often thought that something could have been worked out even if they just gave them citizenship and maintain their Palestinian citizenship or something like that. But for political reasons it was a tool as was Israel. Things could still be worked out.

My wife was pregnant when we got there. We were very naive and idealistic at that time. I would never years later after I became more experienced have taken a pregnant young woman out of the United States for the first time to Syria. But there was the American University hospital in Beirut and we were told that this was superb. But it turned out we wished we had stayed in Damascus and used a Damascene doctor who trained in Cleveland. We would have been much better off than with the American doctor in Beirut. The baby was due in January, and it was decided that the best thing to do was for my wife to go over early and have labor induced. We were getting a little antsy because we thought the doctor was leaving this a little bit late. There were no modern hospital facilities in Damascus.

When the time was due to go, the passes were closed with snow and there was no way that we could drive over and the airline said they wouldn't take her, and it probably wouldn't have been a good idea to fly out anyway. So through friends in the government and the foreign office and in the military we arranged for Sally and myself to be able to drive down through southern Syria and southern Lebanon, which was a closed military zone, and of course we also needed the okay from the Israelis. All of which we got with remarkably little effort. I'm very fond of the Syrian people there, they just couldn't have been nicer.

We drove over on a cold January morning, across the mountains and down the Bekaa Valley to Marjayoun in the south on roads that hadn't seen civilian traffic since the war of independence and were nothing but potholes, you know, where tracked vehicles had been over it. We saw a part of the border area there that we otherwise would not have seen. Then we hit the coast and drove back up to Beirut. But such things were possible then. A couple of years later when the Ba'ath came in that was unheard of.

Q: What was the feeling about, I want to say quote the Soviet menace?

DWYER: Well, it was very real. I managed to get a whole issue of a newspaper confiscated by the Syrian government one time, thanks to an interview I gave to a Lebanese journalist, typical Foreign Service officer prejudice being built early against journalists. But in fact, except for the fact that he quoted an embassy officer as a source and the whole of Syria knew who it was, I didn't have any real complaint. What he quoted was my statement that at the time on a per capita basis Syria was getting more Soviet aid than any other country in the world--which was quite true. But this did not make the Syrian government happy--a few years later they would not have minded, but at that time they did. They grabbed every copy of the newspaper in town, called the Ambassador in and said would you shut Dwyer up, please--and told me to shut up, too. In effect, the Soviets main contribution was military. That was what we were particularly interested in in a particularly backhanded way I sometimes thought. I can remember, I have movies of the Syrian independence day where 6 MiGs overflew it and we didn't know that they had six MiGs.

Q: MiGs being a Soviet type plane.

DWYER: Yes, the Soviet fighter of the day. I don't know what they were--19 or something, anyway the new model. And we didn't know they had these new models or at least that they had as many as six. This was of interest to Washington. I reported it and the military attaché reported it, and the Station chief reported it, I suppose. A few months later when the annual agency report on the military establishments came out they had them down as three. I sent a wire in saying what is this we saw six. We got a wire back saying they had two reports, one saying they had none and one saying they had six so we gave them three.

This was one of our major interests--it certainly was one of the major interests of the Agency at that time. The Soviet embassy had an enormous KGB contingent, and at one time kidnapped one of our Embassy officers, shot him full of drugs and pumped him for what he knew, and fortunately released him unharmed--well, they beat him up pretty badly but at least he came back, which was obviously rare. Nothing great was made about it publicly, of course, but it was indicative of the competition or the conflict.

We had another instance where a good friend of mine, Fairham Atassi [ph], who was an American citizen and Syrian citizen, and he was a businessman, a young man, our age, a junior officer age, so he was a good friend of all the junior officers. His wife was of Syrian extraction but born in New York. He had a couple of grandiose projects including building the railroad that Lawrence had destroyed all the way back to Mecca...

Q: *The Hejaz railway.*

DWYER: The Hejaz railway, which never has been rebuilt. Brown construction company was interested in this and a few other things. Anyway he was a member of a very prominent Syrian family. The Atassis were--there was a cousin who was a prime minister at that time. Fairham presumed he was immune from any serious repercussions from his actions because of his American citizenship, although I personally told him he was not, because of his Syrian citizenship, and so did the consular officer. Anyway he was alleged to have been recruited by the Agency and although I went on record early on and so did a couple of others, saying that this was a man who was not stable, he drank too much, he talked too much. After a few drinks he grew very expansive. And furthermore he was on the very fringes of his family. In any event he was alleged to have been recruited as an American spy and a few months after I left Syria, he had been charged before I left I think, he was taken out and hung in the public square. I forget what minister it was, the Minister of Public Work or something, happened to have an office overlooking the square and on some pretext had requested the American Ambassador to call upon him and out his window was Fairham Atassi's body.

Obviously by that time our relations with Syria were pretty much at the breaking point. Our Ambassador at that time, Ridgway Knight, was quoted in Time magazine--he was asked by Time why he was not more outspoken on these questions and he said very succinctly, "I learned early in my Foreign Service career you do not get into fighting matches with skunks."

I left Syria in the Fall of '63 and the cordial relations of the Embassy with the Syrian government ended shortly thereafter--certainly with the hanging of Fairham and his wife and children were later spirited over the border and back into the United States. It always was not only a sad and bitter memory to me because I liked Fairham and we saw him fairly frequently, but it always seemed to me a case of the people who are responsible for and train in the art of covert activities get very frustrated when they have nothing to do. They tend to try to put some of their spy craft in operation often losing sight of the over all objectives of American foreign policy which in the long scheme of things many of these minor operations produce no historic benefit to speak of but are capable of producing an historic embarrassment to no good end.

RIDGWAY B. KNIGHT
Ambassador
Syria (1960-1965)

Ambassador Ridgway B. Knight was born in Paris, France to American parents.

He joined the Foreign Service in 1946. His career included positions in France, Germany, and Pakistan, and ambassadorships to Syria, Belgium, and Portugal. Ambassador Knight was interviewed by Kirstin Hamblin in 1993.

Q: So after that you were sent to Syria.

KNIGHT: That was where luck came in.

Q: How did it come in?

KNIGHT: Well, at that time Syria was an explosive place. It seemed to be not a particularly good assignment. It was part of the United Arab Republic, and not many people wanted it. When I was asked if I wanted to go to Damascus, I said, "With pleasure." And eight months later Syria broke away. As a matter of fact, if I accepted with such alacrity, it was because I believed that the United Arab Republic was not going to last very long. I had no other insight except my own opinion. So don't ask me how I knew. So I went in October of '60, and in September of '61 Syria broke away, and I was fortunate enough to be named Ambassador.

Q: Did you have a hard time dealing and negotiating for the United States with Syria at that time because they had such a turbulent government?

KNIGHT: Well, I don't know that it was a hard time, but I had a successful time. Because after my five years in Syria...I forget the name of the award, but it's the State Department's top award, Assistant Secretary Talbot made the comment that at no time during my years in Syria had I needed any instructions from the Department.

Q: I have one more question about that. Did our relationship with Israel affect our relationship with Syria?

KNIGHT: What's that?

Q: Did the United States' relation with Israel...

KNIGHT: Of course. That's the heart of the problem.

Q: So that was what made it difficult? After Syria...

KNIGHT: That's the heart of the problem. You know perfectly well that the creation of Israel, and our relationship with Israel, has been...it isn't the only one, but it's been at the heart of an explosive situation in the Middle East ever since. I survived only because I'm the first one to know that the Arabs are so intensely individualistic that even without Israel you can be pretty sure that we have some kind of turmoil in the Arab world. Of course, the interesting thing about the assignment to Syria, and to any Arab country, is the challenge, it's the difficulty of the problem. Because on the one side you have a depth of feeling on the part of the Arabs which is very difficult to appreciate for one who has not lived there. It's cockeyed, it's unjustified, but it's there. And this is one of the reasons why I never felt that the Arab-Israeli problem can be solved

by a single piece of paper, by a nice neat plan. The Arab-Israeli problem can only be solved by time, step by step, little by little, preventing explosions, and I think that with time this is what's happening now. Arafat's position, and the recent initiative leading to the Gaza-Jericho suggestion is not going to solve the whole problem. It's the result of the fact that when we made the proposal, Arafat had no other place else to go, he'd used all his other cards, all his other weapons. He had to try this peace line. It's a great step forward, and I welcome it, but it is only a step toward better relations. But once again I repeat, I don't think the Arab-Israeli problem is going to be solved by any single plan, or one piece of paper. It's still going to take a lot of time to work out.

CURTIS F. JONES
Near Eastern Affairs, Syria, United Arab Republic
Washington DC (1962-1965)

Curtis F. Jones was born in Bangor, Maine in 1921. He graduated from Bangor College in 1942 and then served in the Army for three years. In addition to Egypt, his overseas career has included towards the end of the war that he became interested in Foreign Affairs. He has also served in Lebanon, Ethiopia, Libya, Syria and Yemen. He was interviewed by Tomas F. Conlon on March 29, 1994.

Q: *So you were in Washington on the Syrian desk from...*

JONES: 1962 to 1965. I was deputy for a year and then was Officer in Charge of Egyptian-Syrian Affairs. Immediately, my primary concern shifted from Syria to Egypt, because the cornerstone of American policy in the Middle East, insofar as the Arabs were concerned, was cooperation with Egypt. That cooperation was based on [the shipment of] PL 480 [surplus agricultural commodities], that is, the supply of wheat to Egypt on very benevolent terms. This was Bob Strong's favorite policy. He was the "champion" of PL 480 [commodities] for Egypt and doing business with Nasser.

This all changed more suddenly than we realized, with the assassination of President Kennedy [in 1963]. I can remember standing in Phillips Talbot's office, watching the television the day of the assassination [November 22, 1963]. I think that Talbot knew right then and there that he was on his way out. He subsequently became Ambassador to Greece, where he got caught up in the wheels of Greek-American politics. Bob Strong went out as Ambassador to Baghdad. Rodger Davies, who had been Strong's deputy, took over [as Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs]. Rodger Davies is a very interesting figure. Before his death from a sniper's bullet in Cyprus he was marked "for stardom" [in the Department of State]. Everybody always felt that here was a man who "had it all." He had the talent, the drive, and, most of all, the ability to get along with people. Except that he didn't get along with Strong. Strong was a megalomaniac and didn't have much patience with people who, first of all, didn't work his hours, and, secondly, didn't see things the way that he did and whose minds didn't work the way his mind worked. For some reason [Bob Strong] and Davies didn't get along. However, Davies was so well established in the Department that he was able to replace Strong in any event.

With the advent of President Lyndon Johnson to the White House, in retrospect it becomes apparent that American Middle East policy did almost a 180 degree [turn].

Q: Do you think that this was a deliberate [decision]? In the case of Lyndon Johnson he knew almost nothing about the Middle East and had had no historical contact with it, except possibly to the extent of supporting Israel. But all of the American Presidents did that.

JONES: Well, I am going to express a point of view which some would consider overly conspiratorial. I think that, first of all, foreign policy is made in the White House. Above all, foreign policy on a crucial issue like Israel is made in the White House.

Q: Because of the electoral considerations?

JONES: That's right. And whereas [President] John Kennedy felt secure enough that he could "play" the "Nasser card," without losing too much electoral support in the United States...

Q: You mean Jewish support?

JONES: Yes, or at least pro-Israeli support--Jewish and also fundamentalist Christian support, because there are millions of fundamentalist Christians in the South of this country who feel that Israel is the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, even though they expect that the Jews, on the Day of the Resurrection, will be converted into Christians.

President Johnson may or may not have felt less secure than Kennedy. I suspect that he felt less secure because Washington, when he became President, was full of Kennedy supporters, like Bill Moyers, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Bobby Kennedy, and the rest, who all...

Q: I remember them. They sneered at President Johnson, and they didn't make much of an effort to hide it, either.

JONES: Exactly. They had strong antipathy for Johnson. With one exception--Dean Rusk who, to my mind, though an "inferior" Secretary of State, was a "superior" operator in the bureaucratic environment. He took special pains, while he was Secretary of State during the Kennedy administration, to keep Johnson in the picture. Johnson appreciated that. So Dean Rusk was one Kennedy appointee whom Johnson retained, which I think was unfortunate.

After President Johnson took over, it became time for the PL 480 program [with Egypt] to be renewed. The Egyptian Ambassador in Washington, Mustafa Kamel, was a "Stakhanovite." He worked long hours. He had this dogged determination to work for his country, even though here he was--an "old regime" type, essentially--working for Nasser. As a result, nobody had to work harder in the Department of State than the Egyptian desk officer, because the [Egyptian] Ambassador kept after him.

Q: That's pretty rare among Middle East ambassadors, isn't it? Many of them were "remittance men," weren't they?

JONES: Yes. The other [Middle Eastern] ambassadors were generally of no great consequence. They might be intelligent but they weren't dedicated, whereas Kamal would invite you out to his residence one day a week, he was frequently on the telephone, [but] he was appreciative. He'd give you a big farewell party when you left. But Kamal worked the hell out of you and he worked the hell out of the Department of State. So, as the existing PL 480 Agreement [with Egypt] drew close to expiration...

Q: That would be in 1964?

JONES: That would be in late 1963 or early 1964. Kamel used to ask for appointments with Secretary Rusk. Kamel and I would go up to see Rusk, and I would write the same old memcon [memorandum of conversation]. Kamel would say, "Mr. Secretary, time is getting short. We must renew this agreement. My country is in very serious need of this economic assistance. We are, after all, defending American interests in the Middle East."

Q: Was that true?

JONES: Yes, to a certain extent. Nasser was collaborating with us. He was certainly not rocking the boat with Israel. As a matter of fact, there's always been reason to believe that Nasser, having himself fought against Israel in 1948, was pragmatic insofar as a military contest with Israel was concerned. He was willing...

Q: He was wounded during the 1948 war [with Israel], wasn't he?

JONES: I believe he was, though I can't confirm it. In any case the Secretary's answer every time I went up there was essentially the same: "Mr. Ambassador, we are very interested in preserving the warm ties between Cairo and Washington, but we are distressed by some of the policies of your country. For example, your military involvement in Yemen." Nasser had sent troops to support the [Yemeni] republicans against the forces of the Imam of Yemen, who was supported by Saudi Arabia. [The Saudis] really were our good friends. Furthermore, the Egyptians were involved in the Congo on behalf of [Prime Minister Patrice] Lumumba. I remember the Secretary bemoaning Egyptian involvement in the Congo.

However, as I look back on it now--I didn't know it then--I am convinced, without being able to document it, that the day that Lyndon Johnson was sworn into office as President of the United States, our Middle Eastern policy changed. I think that, first of all, he had close, pro-Israeli friends. For example, Arthur and Matilda Krim of New York City were frequent house guests at the White House. They were intimate friends of Lyndon Johnson's. In the second place Lyndon Johnson was basically a domestic politician. I have always felt--and Vietnam is your area, not mine--that he could have done better than he did in Vietnam. I certainly have no brief whatsoever for Johnson's Middle East policy, starting with the fact that our PL 480 program [in Egypt] began to grind to a halt.

Q: Well, to what extent was Egypt dependent for U. S. food under the PL 480 program? Was this contributing one-quarter or one-third or one-half or more? Was it all that substantial?

JONES: No. It was a great convenience to Nasser to be able to distribute wheat to his people, because Egypt has progressively become a "basket case" economically, starting back then--some 30 years ago. It's only gotten worse over the ensuing 30 years. However, in those days Egypt still had probably not consumed all of the foreign exchange saved during the monarchy. Egypt's economy used to be in fairly good shape, selling long staple cotton to mills in the U. K., and so on. So it wasn't a matter of life and death for Nasser, but it was a serious issue. And by the winter of 1964-65 I had finally woken up, smelled the coffee, and realized what was going on. Our policy of dealing with Nasser was "dead." Nobody had told me that. On the contrary, we had just drawn up an interagency [policy] paper under the direction of Bill Polk of the Policy Planning Council which reaffirmed our policy of collaborating with Nasser. You could see what that was worth, because meanwhile the White House was cutting our legs out from under us.

Q: Were the Israelis deliberately trying to bring this [PL 480 program] to an end? Did they want the United States to be on more "distant" terms with Egypt than we had been?

JONES: I think that there's no doubt that the Israelis "hated" American collaboration with Nasser...

Q: But we were never all that close to Nasser anyhow.

JONES: No, but Nasser, after all, supported the "fedayeen" in Gaza, the Palestinians, and--even though it was no more than verbal support--it was still a bad precedent. The view of the Israelis was that almost anybody in Egypt would be better for Israel than Nasser.

When we go on to 1967, I think that we can see that one Israeli objective was to humiliate Nasser and drive him out of office.

Q: Then you were on the [Egyptian] desk until...

JONES: 1965. So, during the winter of 1964-65 I realized what was going on and I made it known that I would like a transfer.

NORMAN L. PRATT
Economics Officer
Damascus (1963-1967)

Norman L. Pratt was born in New York in 1916. He graduated from Dartmouth College with an A.B. degree in 1937. He served in the U.S. Army from 1941 to 1946 and then joined the Foreign Service at the end of 1946. His overseas career included posts in Egypt, Libya, Germany, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, and South Africa. Mr. Pratt was interviewed by Dayton Mak in 1991.

Q: So, lets hear about your story of Damascus.

PRATT: We got to Beirut in July, 1963. While on our way there we had heard of the failed coup against the regime that was then in power.

A little history. They had gone through the period of unity, 1958-61, with Egypt. That had broken up basically because of the Syrian dislike of any foreigner and especially the Egyptians who came in acting as if they had conquered the country. The old conservative ruling groups came back to power with the breakup of the union. They lasted until March, 1963.

Q: They were led by whom?

PRATT: I have forgotten their names. They predated me.

March 1963 saw a coup by the Ba'ath party which was partially political but basically military. By August when we were arriving there had been various conversations with Nasser looking towards a restoration of the union, but they had broken down because Nasser found that they really didn't have any idea of what they wanted.

Q: That would be the restoration of the United Arab Republic?

PRATT: Yes. The August coup which failed was led by military who were interested primarily in restoring the union as opposed to Ba'ath who had their own political agenda. This Ba'ath agenda is hard to pin point. It has elements of Arab socialism, whatever that means. Basically it evolves around the nationalization of major industries and generally a controlled economy and getting rid of the old landed aristocracy which had put their money into industry. Labor practices were pretty brutal. The biggest of the industries was a cotton mill that had the practice of firing its employees after every two and a half months; the reason was that in three months they gained permanent status and certain benefits from the company under Syrian law. So even Syrians who were fairly conservative felt this sort of thing was not the way to run a country.

Within the Ba'ath party, itself, you had the emergence of a fairly conservative group as against a more active, more socially minded group. The party, itself, of course, was dominated by the military. There had been a continual purging of the ranks in the military, getting rid of the more conservative officers and the Ba'athi officers emerged more and more in control. They in turn split. I hesitate to say that it was a split based on religion. Certainly the more radical group was distinguished by their membership in the Alawite community, which is a heterodox Moslem religious minority, the roots of which are rather vague. The Alawites are concentrated in the mountains east of Latakia.

GEORGE M. LANE
Economic Officer
Aleppo (1964-1966)

Ambassador George M. Lane graduated from the Fletcher School of Law and

Diplomacy in 1957. His Foreign Service career included positions in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Morocco, Libya, Swaziland, Washington, DC, and an ambassadorship to Yemen. Ambassador Lane was interviewed by Richard Nethercut in 1990.

Q: Then were your subsequent assignments in Syria and Morocco more hospitable in terms of climate?

LANE: Interestingly enough the assignment in Aleppo was much more hospitable in terms of climate. In terms of general physical ambience, Aleppo was a charming city, one of the most fascinating old cities in the world with miles and miles of underground passages, the old souk, the old market which had been there since Crusader times. But we got there in 1964, which was a year after the Ba'ath Revolution in 1963 in Syria, so politically it was a time when Americans were not popular-- particularly official Americans were looked on with great suspicion. It was in a sense, just the opposite of Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia the political ambience was very friendly. The Saudis were happy to have us there, and there was no problem doing your job at all. But the climate was terrible. In Syria the climate was very pleasant, fascinating things to see and do. But politically it was very tough to try to go around and see people. If as Economic Officer, I went to call on somebody I had to leave behind some brochures from some American company because otherwise the secret police, who would always follow me, and who would call on whoever I called on right after I left, would want to know why that person was consorting with the American Embassy--the American Consulate representatives. So that was a bit unpleasant as far as working conditions were concerned.

LEONARDO NEHER
Economic/Commercial Officer
Damascus (1964-1966)

Ambassador Leonardo Neher was born in Ohio in 1922. He received a bachelor's degree from Green State University in 1948 and a master's degree from the University of Chicago in 1952. From 1943-1946, he served in the U.S. Army overseas. Ambassador Neher joined the Foreign Service in 1954 and served in Morocco, Vietnam, Syria, Zaire, Chad, Dominican Republic, and Burkina Faso. Ambassador Neher was interviewed by Charles Kennedy on October 18th, 1989.

Q: What was the situation in Damascus at that time? We're talking about 1964.

NEHER: The Ba'ath party, the radical Arab "renaissance" party, had been in power. It was maintaining the same confrontational attitude toward Israel, and its supporters, that it has ever since. It was uncompromising. And we were the second worst enemy in the world as the supporters, the defenders of Israel. Relations were very strained and got worse during the two years that I was there, a run-up to the '67 war. In one notorious case, a covert operation by the CIA had gone wrong and one of the local agents, who had been under a businessman's cover, was dragged before a military court to repeat his confessions before television cameras. Day

after day he confessed, each day in weaker condition, clearly beaten almost to death. It was obvious that he was barely able to hang together, and then when the confession was complete, the authorities hanged him in the public square. During that time the radio and press were pounding the anti-American drums, denouncing the United States, and the Embassy, naming names of embassy personnel involved, and describing how the CIA agents had tried to seduce a Syrian naval officer. The officer had, it seems, met an agent at the Ambassador's residence during an official reception there.

Q: Who was the Ambassador?

NEHER: Ridgway Knight. You can imagine what that did for our already sour relations. And that was under a relatively moderate Ba'athi government in Damascus. Then came a radical coup, bringing in another wave of unskilled military people to govern. Some of the most radical moved in with real revolutionary zeal. They constituted themselves into a type of Red Guard. They evicted bank personnel and put the banks in the hands of young military people who knew nothing about banking. There was chaos in the economy and the political life. Businesses were nationalized. The newcomers were radical, leftist, disorganized. And more than ever we were the enemy. So it was very difficult to...

Q: I can't think of any reason for a Commercial Officer there.

NEHER: There was a post. There was a position. And I wanted to be in the Middle East.

Q: Let's talk about other things, but from a strictly commercial point of view, what commercial interest could we possibly have had?

NEHER: That's what I had to try to define for the Ambassador. The Ambassador wanted action. I was a staff member of his and he wanted action. But there wasn't anything that I could give him. I was not at all interested in promoting U.S. investments because the history of U.S. investment had been characterized by total loss for the United States. Mostly. There wasn't a lot of trade that could be developed. So I concentrated trying to promote licensing arrangements, where Syrian money, rather than U.S. money would be at risk, and licensing profits would go back to the U.S. Needless to say, it didn't work out very well. But I also was handling labor affairs. And labor in Syria was very political. The Ba'ath party was using the labor unions as one of its militant arms. This was the Red Guard that moved into banks and other enterprises. So handling labor was my most interesting task. I had two very interesting Ministers of Labor during my tour of duty. One of them was very colorful. He was the most radical of all, and was sort of a wild man. He was executed eventually by the Syrian government. I think he murdered the husband of his girlfriend, or something of that sort. It was a peculiar story, but he was a big guy, and had a great big flowing moustache, and he spoke in a voice that rocked the room. I remember the first time when I called on him. He had assembled the press and television. When I came into his office he asked me to sit down. Then, with cameras rolling, he launched into a virulent anti-imperialist--i.e., anti American-- speech. Well, I sat there not knowing whether to remain or to walk out. Finally I said some absolutely innocuous words to the media. And then, when he had finished he sent everybody away and came over and embraced me, and said, "Have some coffee." And this was the kind of relationship we had during the short time he remained as

Minister. It was a surprisingly productive relationship. Fearless, even of this representative of imperialism, he talked freely, responded to my questions and proved to be very helpful. In fact, on one occasion he agreed that Syria would support one of our candidates as head of the ILO instead of the Polish candidate put forth by the Soviet Union. It was a typical East-West conflict and came at a time when Syria was most closely aligned with the USSR. Imagine the futility of trying to convince the Syrian government to support a Western candidate against one from the East bloc. But that's what the instructions to the Embassy were and we had to try. Well, he agreed over coffee in his office to do just that. It didn't come off, of course, and he must have gotten an earful from less naive members of the ruling clique, but it gave me an interesting moment and something to report to Washington that must have looked surprising in writing. We continued to have that kind of a relationship throughout the short term of his ministry. He sent me a card that I have lost and I wish I had back again. It was a greeting card on the occasion of May Day, the last May Day I was there. On the front was a cartoon showing Uncle Sam with his red, white and blue top hat with his head being cut off. The caption was "Death to imperialists." And inside he had written "With friendliest greetings." Crazy. I wish I still had that card, but like so many things that disappear in the constant packing and unpacking of an FSO, it got lost. Too bad. It would make an amusing addition to my souvenir collection.

Q: What was the Embassy...here you were in this situation, did you feel you were marking time, or was Ambassador Knight trying to do something about relations, or was it sort of almost felt it was a lost cause and you were just holding on?

NEHER: As far as the commercial work was concerned, that was marking time. But the Ambassador treated me very well, and on the very first trip he made out of town, he chose me to go with him. He was interested in the situation in Vietnam and at staff meetings he would draw me into discussions of it for the benefit of the other members of the team. And then I got more and more into the economic side from the commercial side, and did some general economic reporting. I tried to get the Embassy to take an initiative to kill the AID program for Syria.

Q: Did we have an AID program?

NEHER: We still had remnants. Most or all of the money was the local currency counterpart of PL 480 funds. The AID mission was proposing to use it to build grain silos, but none of the money could be released until Syria paid its overdue debt to the U.S. I remember writing a very provocative memorandum to the Ambassador in which I pointed out how Syria used its resources against the interests of the United States, and therefore we should put maximum pressure on the government to repay the loan, then cancel the aid program in its entirety. I proposed that if we could not cancel the program we should put the money into the Hejaz railway which the Syrians wanted to build to connect Damascus with Medina or Jeddah or someplace in the Muslim holy land. I said that since that was a complete rat hole, and nothing profitable could ever come of it, we should put it into something that would be a constant drain on the treasury of Syria. I wrote this, tongue in cheek, but used a logic the Ambassador appreciated. He sent it to the head of the Economic Section who was my boss, a very sober officer. He said, "You can't be serious about this." And I said, "I'm very serious about it." Anyway, we did finally end the aid program, whether for the payment problem or another, I don't recall.

Q: What was the attitude? Here is an Embassy in a very hostile environment and at the same time you're looking at Israel. The Foreign Service has been considered to be more pro-Arab than pro-Israel. Did you find any of this? Or what was the attitude towards Israel from the people around, and your own attitude towards our policy? We're talking about the '66-'68 period.

NEHER: It's no secret that the Foreign Service, particularly people who specialize in Middle Eastern affairs, tend to be unbalanced in favor of the Arabs against Israel. I found that in the Embassy at the working level. I don't think I detected that in the top levels at the Embassy, either Ambassador Knight, who was there when I arrived in 1964, or his Deputy Chief of Mission, Bob Moore. They were very balanced, very wise, very good people. A political appointee followed Knight and he too was, I thought, very balanced--Hugh Smythe. But at the working levels, some of my colleagues were rabid anti-Israelis. That always bothered me, and we argued about it, but it seemed to me then and still does that most of these attitudes were formed long ago in family backgrounds and pre-government experience.

Q: Well, looking at it, how did you see U.S. interests in the area at the time?

NEHER: Well, Syria was hopeless as far as the United States was concerned. Its ties were with the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, East Germany. It wasn't interested in us. We weren't interested in Syria except to try to do whatever we could to encourage moderation and allow us to continue observing the frontier. We had to be there for those purposes and I think that my role in Syria was mostly that of observer. I had good contacts with Syrians, despite the policy differences between the two countries. I also contributed to the education of a new ambassador and his DCM, neither of whom had ever been in the Middle East before. We had a DCM come in as a Charge in an interval between our Ambassadors. He really needed an education. We started in the very first staff meeting--some of us questioned some of the assumptions behind his guidance to us, especially that U.S. policy toward the Arabs and Israel was an even-handed one. We disagreed so strongly that he invited several of us to meet with him and discuss this at length. That gave us the opportunity to give our points of view and describe the very different relations the United States had with Syria and other Arab states on the one hand and Israel on the other.

At any rate, when I look back on my time there, I go clear back to that decision I made in Turkey about seeing the world, and when somebody asks me about Damascus I think of Palmyra, and I think of the Krak des Chevaliers, of Jerusalem, and the ruins of Jerash, of traveling down to the Gulf of Aqaba, of seeing a new and fascinating part of the world. And I come back again to my original plan for my career in the Foreign Service.

Q: To finish up with Syria. How did you, and the Embassy, view the "communist menace" there? Did you see this being as a place that was being taken over by the Soviets, or did you see local communism of the Syrians used maybe for nationalistic purposes?

NEHER: I think the latter. I think we saw the Syrians as highly nationalistic, ambitious, particularly in relations with other Arabs and with their eyes on Lebanon. We assumed that the Syrians wanted greater influence in Lebanon, didn't like the Lebanese government, didn't like the westernization, because the Syrians are the people from the other side of the mountains. They're on the desert side. What they saw was the Sodom and Gomorrah of Beirut, with its casinos, its

luxuries, its western orientation. We saw that as something that held the Syrians' attention, but we didn't see the Syrians as interested in communism as a form of government. They wanted their ties with the Soviets, as a source of military assistance and economic support. They also found a great deal of solidarity on the international front. They liked that. It was very valuable for them. It allowed them to be confrontational with Israel and resistant to us. It also allowed them to be truculent in their dealings with other Arab countries.

For example, during my time in Syria, the country did not have diplomatic relations with Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt. So we saw Syria as a radical Arab state that was trying to hold itself together, to govern itself, and to ride on the slogan of Arab unity, the Arab nation. The relation with the communist countries were arrangements of convenience, for ways of getting ...

Q: So we didn't see this communism being the wave of the future?

NEHER: Not at all, not at all.

Q: I must say the Middle Eastern world does seem to have its own inoculation against communism, it's its own world, and it's not going to be influenced by us, or by others.

NEHER: That's right.

Q: Were you there during the...was it the '67 war?

NEHER: No, we left in '66. But we were there during a Ba'athi coup. An interesting little event there. When we'd gone through the coup in Saigon it was pretty noisy and our house was right downtown, not too far from the presidential barracks, and we had the artillery shells going over, and mortars, all through the night, crashing nearby. And only the next morning when the noise of the coup was tapering off did I realize that the electricity hadn't gone off, and I had a tape recorder there, and I could have taped a coup. I told my family how disgusted I was that I didn't think about taping the coup. I said, "Next time." So there we were in February of '66, in Damascus, and about 6:30 in the morning my two little boys--about eight and nine years old--came crashing into the bedroom saying, "Daddy, there's a coup. Get out your tape recorder." Boy, I thought, how blasé these Foreign Service kids can be. First thing to think about in a coup, is to get the tape recorder out. So I taped it, and I have a very good Syrian coup on tape. A noisy one, airplanes, tanks, and guns, and some patrol action right in front of my house.

Q: I don't know how much we should deal with your time in the Department of State, and the Department of Defense. This is from '66 to '70. What were your major jobs?

NEHER: The first two years you can pass over. It's the only time in my Foreign Service career that I worked 9:00 to 5:00, or 8:30 to 5:00 or whatever it was. I never had that kind of job before, or since. But that one was in munitions control, and I was what is called an Arms Policy Officer. It was really a job that had to be done. It had to be done by a FSO, but it was without challenges or interest.

CHARLES E. MARTHINSEN
Economic/AID Officer
Damsacus (1964-1967)

Ambassador Charles E. Marthinsen was born in Missouri in 1931. After receiving his bachelor's degree from Gannon College in 1953, he served in the United States Army from 1953-1955. His career has included positions in Dacca, Beirut, Jeddah, Damascus, Montreal, Cairo, Tripoli, and an ambassadorship to Qatar. Ambassador Marthinsen was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in July 2003.

Q: You went to Damascus in '64.

MARTHINSEN: '64 to '67. We left in the spring of '67 to the sound of Syrian jets being shot down by Israeli fighter aircraft south of the city and a pretty strong suspicion that it was all going to hit the fan pretty soon. Tensions had been developing for over a year.

Q: Let's go to Damascus in '64. How was your Arabic by this time?

MARTHINSEN: By that time, it was pretty good. It was pretty good Hejazi Arabic. Then I had to learn how to sing Arabic in the Damascus manner. That was another good experience. Syrians we found very friendly and welcoming and much more relaxed as a society.

Q: What was the government at that point?

MARTHINSEN: It was pre-Baathi. It was a military dictatorship with the trappings of democracy. While we were there, the Baathi coup occurred.

Q: What was your job at the embassy?

MARTHINSEN: I was an economic/AID officer. It was an interesting marriage of an AID office and State econ. under a counselor of embassy, AID's John Tobler. There were Norm Pratt, the economic officer and on the AID side, John Moore. I worked for both of them. We had a number of AID programs going on with the Syrians and we were interested in the economic life and developments in the country.

Q: What was the economic life like then?

MARTHINSEN: It was pretty good. The standard of living in Syria was quite reasonable by Middle Eastern standards. The people whom we tended to meet and associate with were home-owning, car-owning, traveling businesspeople. While we were there, there was a series of nationalizations of industry, which presented big problems for many of these people.

Q: Syria has some elements making it, if not a wealthy, a moderately economically viable state.

MARTHINSEN: Absolutely.

Q: They had good crops and were training people and all of this and yet... How was that working out?

MARTHINSEN: I think the economy has never really faltered. It took some serious hits at the time of the nationalizations but from all I've read and heard, they weathered that and worked out a bureaucratic solution to the problem. Agriculture has almost always been very healthy. Production is mostly for the domestic market; they don't get involved in much exporting. Maybe a bit to Iraq and perhaps to Turkey. The most serious problem that the Syrians faced and still face--nothing ever changes in the Middle East--is that there is a kind of folk memory or ambition or idea that historic Syria has a claim to legitimacy. Historic Syria is today's Syria plus Hatay, which the Turks seized when the French were ruling Damascus--the chunk of Turkey that dips down into Syria; Lebanon, which we hear about from time to time; And Palestine, that is Palestine including Jordan. These were all parts of the Ummayyad Empire and, earlier, of the realm of the Selucids, heirs of Alexander. That is historic or greater Syria. They think still that those areas should belong to Damascus. I think that's their problem and may account for the special relationship between Syria and Lebanon as well as the problem of what's left of Palestine.

Q: How did you find Damascus and Syrian society? Could you get around? Was it a problem?

MARTHINSEN: After the coup, it was much more of a problem because the society kind of closed down. Prior to that, it reminded one a bit of Beirut, very open and rather free notwithstanding the nature of the government. There were a lot of Syrians who had language skills other than Arabic, had traveled widely in Europe and the United States, and had business ties with the US. It was very comfortable living.

Q: Prior to the coup, how about Soviet influence? Was this a big deal?

MARTHINSEN: The Soviet presence was quite large, more so after the coup. Moscow financed some major development projects such as the Euphrates Dam and some power work. Most of the military equipment that the Syrians imported came from the Soviet Union. At the same time, during our stint in Damascus, the Soviets mounted a "Be kind to Americans" campaign. They encouraged contacts between their embassy staff and our's. We were told by the ambassador we should respond and if we should feel so inclined, we should reciprocate their overtures. I remember hosting a carefully contrived dinner party at our house. We invited my Soviet counterpart and his wife. The only thing that was mildly disturbing was that an additional Soviet came along I guess to watch over us--a minder, perhaps.

Q: Let's talk about the coup. What was the situation before the coup and how did the coup happen and what were we doing during this?

MARTHINSEN: It was a power struggle between competing groups of officers.

Q: The Baath were not in power at this point?

MARTHINSEN: No, not as a party. When the French withdrew from Damascus, they left in place a rather feeble parliamentary regime which was soon overthrown--there have been so many coups d'état in Damascus over the years, I've lost track. In any event, it swiftly turned into a kind of colonel's rule: military dictators took over. So far as we could tell, there was a rising sense of vexation with military rule; not infrequently military officers don't view the world as other people do. So it was a competition between factions within the military, one or another abetted by the Baath party, which had an organization with cells throughout the society. Literally they ended up fighting with tanks and infantry in the streets of Damascus. Thinking they were having one of their regular coups d'états, most of our Damascus neighbors, very nice people, invited us to come up on the roof and see the action going on. One of the senior officers didn't realize he was being ousted from power; he held out when his house was attacked by tanks just a few blocks away. So there was a very exciting artillery duel to witness. By dawn another regime emerged. It was military and pro-Baathi.

Q: You were doing what in Damascus?

MARTHINSEN: I was doing the routine State Economic/Commercial reporting and backstopping my AID co-boss.

Q: Who was our ambassador?

MARTHINSEN: Two. Ridgway Knight was there when we first arrived. Hugh Smythe, a political appointee, succeeded Knight. Smythe was an experienced educator.

Q: But did they have any feel for the situation? Or was there much that could be done there outside of Washington.

MARTHINSEN: It was pretty hopeless. The Syrians had to decide who they were, what they wanted, and where they were going on their own. As you recall, they united with Egypt for a few years.

Q: The United Arab Republic.

MARTHINSEN: Yes. That was a serious development that reflected the desires of many politically conscious, patriotic Syrians who could submerge their Syrian identity for the sake of a union of the Arabs. There has always been this romantic idea that all Arabs starting from their homeland in what is today Saudi Arabia all across North Africa to the Sudan and east along the Peninsula are one people. Many believe they could recreate the Ummayyad or Abbasi Empire.

Q: You would have these things with Qadhafi signing up Tunisia. All these countries have had these announcements.

MARTHINSEN: Qadhafi originally thought that he was going to bring Libya into a fruitful marriage with Egypt.

Q: This has been something around, but... Yemen was in at one point?

MARTHINSEN: Oh, yes, definitely. That's why there used to be 3 stars on the UAR flag.

Q: That was the United Arab Republic: Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. How did we view the Baath Party when you arrived there?

MARTHINSEN: Askance because it was socialist. The Baath favored the nationalization of the means of production and all that other good stuff that the Labour Party used to stand for in Britain.

Q: Did we have contacts with the Baath Party or did we view it as inconsequential?

MARTHINSEN: No serious contacts to my knowledge. I never heard my military colleagues – we had several attaches – talk about their contacts with Baathi representatives or indeed with any of the groups within the army. Syria had gone through a period of time when there was one military coup after another as various factions gained or lost power. When the Baathis came that ended. Finally Hafiz Al-Asad took power.

Q: But that was after your time.

MARTHINSEN: Yes. He was commander of the air force and supported the Baath at first. He didn't emerge as dictator-president at that time.

Q: When did you leave in '67?

MARTHINSEN: We left as the Israelis were shooting down Syrian jets just south of Damascus. I had orders to succeed Ed Springer as American consul in Port Said. Meanwhile, interesting things occurred in the Middle East. While we were on home leave, the Six Day War occurred. We watched it on TV. That changed the complexion of things not the least for American diplomatic assignments. The consulate in Port Said was burned to the ground. Fortunately, Springer was a canny old friend. He had our recently arrived household effects, including all the kids' toys and beds and everything, moved out of the consulate's warehouse. Thus we emerged from that calamitous period in Egypt with our household effects totally intact. PER said, "You can either come here and walk the corridors or go on TDY to USIA which is manning the American pavilion in Expo '67 in Montreal. We both agreed that it would be far more fun to spend some time in Montreal rather than down to DC with our two boys.

HUGH G. APPLING
Deputy Chief of Mission
Damascus (1965-1966)

Hugh Appling was born and raised in California. He received a bachelor's degree

in biology from the University of California at Berkeley and then served in the U.S. Army. In 1945, Mr. Appling entered Stanford University for graduate studies in political science. He joined the Foreign Service in 1947. His career included positions in Austria, the United Kingdom (England), Germany, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, and Washington, DC. Mr. Appling was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: You made a tremendous jump when you went as DCM to Damascus.

APPLING: I was worried about getting too deeply involved in Europe and about being stereotyped as a management person. Damascus was approved.

Q: What was the situation in 1965 in Syria.

APPLING: Stagnant to some extent. They were locked into the aggressive hostility to Israel and to American policy in support of Israel's independence. The Ba'athists had taken power and were insecure. They saw enemies on every side and they were not open to searching for areas of cooperation. We were still putting some assistance into Syria at the time. The Soviets were moving in and gaining influence. They had the ear of the Syrian government more than we and were providing military supplies.

It was my first experience working with a government which was suspicious and antagonistic at every turn. It was impossible to conduct any conversation without our being scolded for our position on Israel.

It was also something of a police state. We were kept under surveillance and couldn't invite guests to our house without them being screened by their secret police. If we gave a reception, two photographers would show up and take pictures of everybody.

Having said that, there were a number of Syrian government officials and a large number of Syrian people whose views I respected and we were good friends.

I remember being somewhat shaken by my first staff meeting when I was chargé. I asked what do you think we're doing here? Nobody answered. It was a shock.

We took what opportunities there were to enter into dialogue with the Syrians. I did not then perceive what I think I see now, Syria's interest in area hegemony. I didn't realize they wanted to exert regional power. There were unending disputes and reconciliations with Iraq and sometimes with Egypt. We went through assorted coups.

Q: How seriously did we view the Soviet threat.

APPLING: On the scale of one to ten, if ten means that they were about to invade and one means we had no fear, I would put it at 3 or 4. We watched with concern but, I think the Soviets didn't want a major confrontation with us there.

Q: Any fear of a communist takeover?

APPLING: No, we relied on the fact that the Syrians didn't want that. It was a Moslem state and was fairly anti-communist. They're Arab nationalists and they didn't want to be taken over by anyone. There are many who feel that the Arab states are more impervious to home grown communism than are others.

There were some communists in town. There was an incident which arose from a squabble at the international school. A communist lawyer got into it and we were concerned that he would exploit and aggravate our difficult relations. However, Syrian anti-Americanism worried us more than their pro-Sovietism.

There were occasions when I could go, as privately as possible, to Syrian officials to point out that slanderous anti-American stuff in the press every day was getting out of hand and to suggest that it would be useful to have a word with the editors. Sometimes it would be toned down.

Q: One more question about Damascus. How did you find the atmosphere regarding Israel within the embassy.

APPLING: There is a myth that the State Department is pro-Arab. I found all of the staff in Damascus to be objective. We reported honestly and tried to find ways to improve relations but there was no anti-Israel bias.

Q: You had a new ambassador who was not career. A poor place for a non professional.

APPLING: He had never been in government before. I assumed he was appointed because there was a political debt to him. He did not like me and we parted company very quickly. My judgment of his role is rather harsh and I should not express it.

MABEL MURPHY SMYTHE (HAITH)
Foreign Service Spouse
Damascus (1965-1967)

Ambassador Smythe was born in Montgomery, Alabama. After three years at Spelman, she attended Mount Holyoke for her senior year and received her degree in economics and sociology. Dr. Smythe led a very active life, serving as a member on numerous advisory boards and professional organizations, and as a U.S. delegate to several international conferences. She also taught at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University, Brooklyn College, and Shiga University in Japan, edited numerous books, and was a contributing editor for several journals. Dr. Smythe spent her time in Syria as a Foreign Service spouse, but later went on to be Ambassador to Cameroon and served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. Dr. Smythe was interviewed on May 2, 1986 by Ann Miller Moran.

Q: In '67, this was?

SMYTHE: In '67. It was with Hugh that they broke off relations during the Six-Day War, and so we were evacuated to Spain, at least dependents were. As soon as I got there, we cabled the embassy in Madrid not to send her to Syria, but to Rome, where we had safe haven. She was due within a day or two in Syria, and they knew she wasn't to go there under the circumstances. So she came on to Rome, and on the way back we stopped by Madrid and picked up her things and had them shipped to the United States. Meanwhile, Hugh remained in Rome in a kind of embassy-in-exile for a while. We were in Rome two or three weeks. When he went home, we went to New York, he went to Washington, because I needed to get back to the apartment. We had tenants in the apartment while we were away, and we needed to reestablish home base.

It was a couple of months before they decided where he was to go next, and that was Malta. Pam and I were going to stay in New York while he went on to start with Malta, because this was going to be an election year. We weren't sure how long he would be there. So I finished up the school year while he did his first five months in Malta; then I joined him.

Q: What were you doing back here?

SMYTHE: I headed the New Lincoln School.

Q: You were on a leave of absence, I suppose, when he was in Syria?

SMYTHE: When he was in Syria, I took a two-year leave. He didn't know about Malta until a little late, so I started the year. He wasn't to go until the end of December. I think he had Christmas in New York and then he went to Malta. We remained in New York that year, in a funny kind of situation. We weren't sure whether we were going or staying, so we left the tenants in our apartment, because a friend of ours was going to be away. He was the executive secretary of the Japan Society, and he had to go to Japan to change his office over. He was going to be at the Japanese office, and so we sublet his apartment. That was 1968, until the spring of '69. Then Hugh came back from Malta. We stayed in the apartment of this acquaintance until June or July or August, something like that, and then we went to our own apartment and the tenants went to an apartment of their own.

Hugh was to be in Malta--this was '68--another year, but Nixon had already been elected, so there was no point in his going back to Malta on a long-term basis. So we just went over there for the summer again, in the summer of '69, and took part in his farewells to the diplomatic corps. He came back and that was the end of diplomacy for a while.

Q: He had been with USUN, and that's obviously diplomacy, but how did he happen to be approached to take a chief of mission in the Middle East?

SMYTHE: I don't know precisely how that happened. We had done very little traveling in the Middle East, but he had done some writing that included the Middle East. He was lecturing at the Foreign Service Institute, and one day, in the middle of a lecture, someone handed him a

message saying, "Please call John Mason (I think) in the White House."

So he said, "All right. As soon as I finish my lecture, I'll call."

He said, "No. Now."

And Hugh excused himself and went to see what it was, and it was the appointment to Syria. They said they were going to send a car for him; they didn't say what it was. They said a car was coming for him, be ready, and he should go right away. So he went and talked with whoever this was, chairman of the Civil Service Commission or something. It sounds like an inappropriate assignment to be telling him, but it was someone on the White House staff, asking how he would like to serve in Syria.

Q: Was this the first inkling he had?

SMYTHE: The very first. He hadn't been told anything about it. When he came home that night, that was quite a surprise.

Q: How did you feel about it?

SMYTHE: Excited, because he had had a lifelong wish to go into diplomacy. Hugh had been nominated by his school for a Rhodes scholarship, back in the days when there were no black Rhodes scholars, so it didn't get anywhere. But he had said that if he could major in international law he would, and he'd go into foreign affairs. At one point, the NAACP was interested in pushing the State Department to appoint some blacks, and they said, "Well, we don't know any suitable ones." They said, "We'll get some for you. Send some interviewers." So Hugh and I were interviewed. I was interviewed as a spouse, not as a candidate.

Q: It was Lyndon Johnson's approach to the NAACP?

SMYTHE: No, this was years before. The NAACP had nothing to do with his appointment. No, this came to naught. This was back in the 1940s. It was about '48 or '49, something like that. We went down and were interviewed and treated politely and that was the end of that, and nothing else happened. In 1960 or '61, I think it was, Mennen Williams was Assistant Secretary for Africa and he started an Advisory Council on African affairs. I was a member of that council and Hugh was, and we began interacting with the State Department in a number of ways.

Q: You were very familiar with the organization, then?

SMYTHE: Yes. I had had a diplomatic passport from 1962. This experience in '61-'62, whetted Hugh's appetite again. What happened was, there was a friend of ours, David Jones, who had graduated from law school at Harvard and had gone into politics. He was a brother-in-law of Secretary Pierce of HUD. But David was a Democrat; Sam was a Republican. He came to us one day and said, "I am getting up a list of people who have a background in foreign experience, and I want to have *curricula vitae* that explain what you've done internationally and give me an idea of what kinds of jobs you might be interested in." So I wrote on mine I'd be interested in

international student activity, particularly placing students from other countries in American universities and vice versa. In a matter of a couple of months, I was asked to join the Advisory Commission on Educational Exchange.

Hugh's appointment took longer. They were thinking in terms of chief of mission, because he had already, by the time that this came up, had the U.N. exposure. It was '65 when he was approached. He had already done a lot of things with regard to Africa, had been back to Africa again, and we had published the book in 1960. Syria was the kind of place where expertise in the Middle East was less important than being able to stand firm on some issues and negotiate, and Hugh was not without some acquaintance with the Middle East. So that's how it happened. I think they were just filling a spot there.

Q: This must have been an interesting departure for you both. It's such a cloistered life, almost, at an embassy in a hardship post like Damascus.

SMYTHE: It was. There was such opportunity for growth. Neither of us had been exposed to much in the way of archeology, and the first recreational trip I went out of my way to take after I got to Syria was to--I had already seen the ruins at Baalbek on another visit to the Middle East. I attended a conference in '62 in Beirut and had taken a side trip to Baalbek. But the first trip I got after I went to Syria was to see the ruins of a town. I can't remember the name of it now, Ramesh or something like that. It was not far from the Bekaa Valley. It had a great many ruins and underground they had great cavernous water--not tanks--they were natural open spaces that could hold enough water to keep a town of 10,000 for a year.

Q: Sort of cisterns.

SMYTHE: Sort of natural cisterns, yes. They had three huge ones underground. Anyway, I was absolutely fascinated and it kept me going while I was there. I thoroughly enjoyed this.

The refugee issue came to me then. I first became interested in refugees through the Palestinians. And the third thing is that, anthropologically, it was so exciting, and the people are nice people, interesting. The land is dry and forbidding in lots of spots, but there's enough good agricultural land so that Syria would never starve no matter what governing system they had, if they'd give people a chance.

Q: Also, historically it's so rich with the crusaders' castles.

SMYTHE: It was marvelous. I went through those crusaders' castles. The legends that have grown up around Syria--it's just exciting.

Q: Yes, it is; it's fascinating. That's a pretty active spot. Syria is constantly quarreling with neighbors and constantly sealing off borders and then reopening them.

SMYTHE: And their crazy, crazy government. We hadn't been there five months before they shot the president out of office. They had an uprising one morning. After that, I made my calls to the wives of the Cabinet all over again, and before I got quite finished, here came another *coup*.

Q: And you had it to do again.

SMYTHE: That time I didn't trouble too much. We had been in Syria four and a half or five months when the first *coup* came. It seems to me that was around February in '66. We lay low for a while, then after eight or ten months, there was another change of government, and that time we didn't know whether there was any point in doing my calls. So we observed things and did what we could, and eventually the Six-Day War came about and off we went.

Q: Did the State Department give you much preparation?

SMYTHE: I took the wives' briefing course. Hugh took the senior seminar. We didn't go over until October, and his appointment had been announced in July. He took the usual briefings, but then the senior seminar was coming up, and because of the security issues in Syria, it seemed wise for him to have more than the usual, and so he had that. It was in--where was it? in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, I think. So he had a good deal of preparation. I found the wives' briefing course very interesting.

Q: Does it cover everything you need to know?

SMYTHE: To go back that far, in '65, it seemed to, and yet there were some wives who had not had the exposure that I had to overseas situations, and I'm not sure that they got as much help in understanding how to approach another continent as they needed, but I confess I'm a bug on that. That is such a sensitive issue. So important. I had had such a good experience, both in Japan and with Crossroads Africa. Traveling in Europe, you don't really have nearly the need for sensitivity that you do in developing places, where people simply cannot be expected to know anything about where we come from.

I found some very strange things, even in the past few years, that people perceive my conversations about schools as meaning schools like their schools. I went as an AMPART last year to Africa, and one of the places I spoke was Zanzibar. The Zanzibaris took for granted the fact that people paid tuition and bought their own books, and something that they said alerted me to this assumption. They said to me, "How can you talk about progress for blacks in the United States when they're too poor to pay school tuition and buy books? You don't educate black children." I said, "I'm sorry, you have a misconception. We arrest parents if they don't send their children to school. We are very upset if people don't send their children to school. They are *required by law* to do so." And it developed that they thought that most blacks are poor and on welfare and unable to pay school fees, and therefore the children are out of school. You have no way of knowing that they assume something like that, unless you know that public schools are not free in all countries. In the past two decades, I've been collecting more and more information about how people need to prepare themselves to approach another culture, and I am still learning every time I'm exposed.

Q: Do you feel the Foreign Service Institute could profit by more enrichment in that field?

SMYTHE: I think always. And I think there's another danger that we don't always recognize. Some Americans are so anxious to make friends, so ready to listen to the other side, that they

forget they're representing the United States, and I found some who went overboard in imitating other countries, other nationals. I was visiting a country once and the cultural affairs officer had me over to dinner, and he was so proud at having trained his four-year-old son to kiss my hand. Well, I cringed. It's so un-American, so unrecognizable. I think we go overboard when we think we must take whole things that are really not normal and comfortable in the United States.

Q: Always be yourself, is what you would say, although you can appreciate others.

SMYTHE: I think that being ourselves is terribly important. You can say anything to people in another culture, within reason. You can say even unpleasant things to people if you understand how they look at things and phrase your offering in a way that they *can* understand and accept, but they have to know that you're not coming at them with animosity. They have to know that you're coming at them with some perception of where they stand and how they see things. So whenever I send a group of students overseas or take them overseas, I want plenty of time to talk about why we listen and why we're careful with our very body posture, that some people take exception to my sitting so that the sole of my foot is facing somebody.

This has become something of a specialty of mine. I co-directed a program to send students from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern overseas for a summer's internship. We had that program beginning in 1984, really the fall of '83, and I insisted on enough time to give them a sense of what they needed to know. I didn't have enough time and money and budget to give them as full an orientation as I would like, but we got as much time as we could give them and packed it full of suggestions and examples.

Q: Do you write your own materials for this?

SMYTHE: Yes, and we had a couple of experts in who had things to say and who had produced films that we could use.

Q: There's another facet to this Foreign Service life that I'm particularly interested in, especially since you were in a Middle Eastern country. I'm sure you know as well as I do that the Arabists from the State Department are a body unto themselves, and they consider that they are the experts. Also, as with any area specialists, they worry about who gets what job. Did you experience any sort of feeling that "you took one of our jobs away"?

SMYTHE: Not really. There was some of this around, and maybe I just didn't hear the negatives as much as the positives, but we had a middle-level officer, who became an ambassador himself later on, who said to my husband, "I have learned more from you than I have from anybody else up to this point." Once [Hugh] sent in an analysis that our policy toward the Middle East was less understanding than it might have been, less sensitive to certain aspects of Arab views and so on. A neighboring ambassador sent in a response saying, "We concur with Ambassador Smythe's comments," or, "We appreciate what he has said." Some of them wrote to him and said, "We could not have said that, we who are permanent members of the staff. We could not have said it." But once Hugh had broken the ice--

Q: So it's a good thing to leaven the mixture with somebody from outside, especially an

anthropologist.

SMYTHE: I think the point is . . .

[End Tape 2, Side 6] [Begin Tape 4, Side 7]

SMYTHE: . . . as to whether you are serious in working there. If you are there for the public relations and it's understood, fine. But if you are there to work and you have a serious attitude, I think they are understanding and appreciative.

Q: For the purposes of the tape, I will repeat what you said, because we were shifting then. You made a very good point that the permanent people--that is, the professional diplomats--seem to make a distinction between those who come in from outside who were in academia, and those who come in from the financial world. There are a great many correlations between academic work and diplomatic work, don't you find?

SMYTHE: For one thing, there is a good deal of in-and-out. Many Foreign Service officers have come from an academic background. In fact, they're more likely to have done graduate work than not to have done it if they have reached a certain level. The second thing is, those who come from outside who are not academic sometimes have a greater adjustment to make, I think, to get at their way of doing things. I found that a great many officers are accustomed to going home and sometimes taking courses at the Foreign Service Institute or serving as diplomat-in-residence or otherwise lecturing to university audiences, so that there is a healthy respect for the ones who are doing some of the intellectual work while they are on the firing line carrying it out.

Q: Also, I think the two disciplines attract similar personalities.

SMYTHE: That's a very good point, yes.

Q: They're going into that quite a bit at the Institute now, and finding that foreign service officers have a definite personality profile. They're introspective and not gregarious and so forth, and that is true also of academic people.

SMYTHE: Right. I have been encouraging young people to take a period of their early career time and try to work as interns or even as junior Foreign Service officers, and see if it isn't a career that they find rewarding.

Q: Is that so? So you see that closeness?

SMYTHE: I see that closeness and I also see the value of the interaction of the analytic and intellectual training and the actual experience on the other end. I don't think we can get too much of that in juxtaposition.

Q: How did the press treat your husband in Syria? Did he have a good press? Were they being pro-America at that time?

SMYTHE: They were being anti-American. If they had an epidemic and they needed--what was it they needed? It wasn't typhus. It seems to me it was cholera. They needed a million cholera shots, and if they got 100,000 from the Soviet Union, it appeared on page one. If they got 1,000,000 from the United States, it appeared on page eight; that kind of thing. Hugh would sometimes call that to their attention and even tease them about it when he was in a group of people who were friendly toward him. But they were very anti-American then, and I must say that we were not as good at interacting with Arabs as we became later, I think.

There was in the United States a feeling, while we were pretty close to the founding of Israel and whatnot, and at pains to make sure that we indicated our support and concern that the more numerous Arabs around them weren't victimizing this small country, we didn't attempt to see both sides and say to the Arabs something that understood where their worries and concerns were. One of the things that Hugh was able to articulate for the Foreign Service was how it looked to the Arabs when we would make a statement that ignored something that was uppermost in their minds, in defense of Israel. They needed to hear that we were looking at both sides. They could understand that we could side with Israel and that we had a good many Jewish citizens who were close to Israel, but they couldn't understand how we'd ignore the Arab citizens, who were probably as numerous all along, and not show some understanding of their point of view.

Q: Don't you think the United States is still suffering from shock over the [German] concentration camps and what was done? I think that is a great part of the national psyche.

SMYTHE: I think that sense of guilt is very strong. I think, too, sometimes our Jewish friends, in their interest in seeing that we move from here to there as quickly as possible, do not always genuflect at all the altars on the way to make sure that they recognize that there are other elements that we have to pay attention to. I have talked with my Jewish friends very often about their negative response to Jesse Jackson, for example, and I am astonished at how many do not realize that black Americans see Andrew Young as hounded out of the U.N. by Jewish complaints. They have forgotten that or pushed it aside or not recognized it. They really do not understand, and so I sit down and talk at length and with some patience about how this looks to a group of people who are not sophisticated about all the nuances, and some of them have said, "I never knew about that," or, "I never thought about it that way." I think we have the same blindness, the same haste to get an effect, and lack of sensitivity to covering all the problems along the way so that the effect will be more solid when it's reached.

Q: Were the Arabs very much aware of the turmoil in this country at that time? The turmoil over civil rights?

SMYTHE: Only a few, and those were the more sophisticated ones who had been here. I remember long conversations with an Arab attorney about the fact that there just was not a good public relations source on behalf of Arabs in the middle sixties. We said, "We are not for hiring people to plant false trails all over, but you do need to have people tell you how to get some newspaper attention to explain the realities of the Arab position."

When we came back, I remember my husband, who was looked upon as, of course, a liberal New Yorker who understood their position, and he was on the faculty of Brooklyn College, which had

a great many Jewish students and faculty members, and they asked him to come talk about Syria. When he talked to them about the Arab point of view and the ways in which we are going to have to find ways of meeting their needs as well as our own and our Jewish needs, they thought he had forsaken them. They thought, "Oh, you're not friendly to Jews anymore," and he had to sit down and explain the great passions. You can't really say you've got to be one way or the other. We have got to make friends with *both* these national entities, and the Arabs are a very large group of national entities that we cannot afford to forget.

Q: And they have the oil.

SMYTHE: Absolutely. [Laughter]

Q: Were the race riots played up much when you were in Syria in the local press?

SMYTHE: No. To tell the truth, you didn't find much foreign matter of any kind in the Syrian papers, not a great interest, not a great deal of concern.

Q: Was much made of the fact that your husband was a black?

SMYTHE: Not very much. One person said to him, "Why is it you look like an Arab? (You know, there are a great many brown Arabs) You look like an Arab." He had piercing eyes and a habit of talking with his hands, which is very Arab (and very Jewish). "My children look more American than you do," one Arab said to him. And so he would talk with them at length and explain. They didn't find it very surprising. We had a few black Foreign Service officers who had served in Syria. We had a couple while we were there, not at the same time. One didn't succeed the other, but was in the same agency. It was a very interesting thing to have them not know much about the color line and not care much about it, not think too much about it.

Q: Did you look on these years as the wife of an ambassador as sort of a holiday from your own career?

SMYTHE: Partly, yes. I wasn't brought up to think of holidays so much. That always runs third or fourth. I saw it as a learning experience, and it was a marvelous learning experience. I saw as much as I could, and Hugh included me in as much official traveling as possible. For instance, if he went to a cheese factory, I went along, and I saw how cheese was made and went through the Wrangler factory with him. They would like to present me with a bouquet or something, and in the case of the Wrangler factory, they presented me with a jacket and pants, which I still have. Hugh was a very active person who didn't like a sedentary life, so when he wasn't doing NATO things or traveling around the country, he was visiting parish priests or factories or something. Toward the end of his tenure, there was a little back-and-forth in the newspapers. Somebody wrote in and said the newspaper didn't seem to have much to write on except the American ambassador. Why did they pay so much attention to the American ambassador? The truth of it was, it was the only game in town. Nothing was happening. He got to be well known, and when he'd visit a village, as our car would go through the streets, people would reach out to shake his hand. I said, "Are you running for public office here?" It was very funny.

Q: You went up to Aleppo, I suppose?

SMYTHE: Oh, yes, many times.

Q: That's an interesting city, isn't it?

SMYTHE: That is, in some ways, more historic than Damascus. Nothing can be more historic than Damascus, but Aleppo has been in continuous use for a longer time than Damascus. I understand they have six or seven layers under the sites we saw.

Q: Yes. Was the dig at Mari very advanced at that time? I guess that must have come in the seventies, where they made that tremendous discovery of all of the clay tablets.

SMYTHE: That was after, yes. Incidentally, I got over to Cyprus and got to see the diggings at Chamonaseki or somewhere in Cyprus, where they had, among other things, a Roman john. It was in the shape of a horseshoe. Do you know, those people must have had twenty toilet seats, and they ran a current of water through. It was a very modern kind of thing. Flush toilets, back in those days. In Syria, in one of the places, they had clay tablets and other ways of keeping records for that town. There were so many things that archaeologists could learn from there. I was absolutely fascinated by it. I got into Jordan a good deal on our way to Jerusalem. Every time VIPs came or members of the family came to visit, we'd take them to the Holy Land, and each time we varied the trip a little bit so that my coverage, by the time we finished, was fairly extensive. Well, everybody went through the Dome of the Rock, but not the tombs of the patriarchs, necessarily. My parents, for instance, came and they couldn't walk very far, so they saw just the highlights, but they loved seeing the mosaics that were in Jericho. Mother and Dad enjoyed that part.

Q: You didn't go into Israel, I suppose.

SMYTHE: Not from Syria. We couldn't at that time. I haven't been to Israel since 1962. Now, on that same trip I did go to Beirut. I carried two passports, a personal one and a diplomatic one, and I think I must have used the personal passport to go into Israel.

We were evacuated to Athens [Syria severed diplomatic relations with the U.S., on June 6, 1967 at the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli War]. One couple was attending the air show in Paris, and they came back with no real understanding of precisely where their children were. Our safe haven was Italy, but it was easier to fly people to Athens and dump them and go back and get some more and get them out fast, so those who were going on to Italy had to do a second trip. It must have been a little stressful to be thirteen and not know where your mother was, or to be parents and not know where your thirteen-year-old and fifteen-year-old were. You know, that's very difficult. Luckily, they were pretty well-balanced children and parents and survived it all.

But the odd experiences have never had me feeling as if I'm really in imminent danger. I always felt as if it couldn't be too bad most likely, and so I've had the privilege of having a front-row seat at some of these events and, at the same time, not feel too upset about what was happening to me and mine. When our daughter was safely in Spain, we simply cabled her from Rome that

we would be in Rome and to come on to Rome instead of going home to Damascus when school was out. This happened on June 5th.

Q: You were saying, be adaptable. [Laughter]

SMYTHE: Yes. There are dramatic things that happen to all of us.

Q: Have you covered everything you wanted to cover, about Damascus and its effect on you and your thinking?

SMYTHE: I think so. We began understanding by getting to know people. There had been a class system that was no more. Some of the people who had been upper class, the richer people, would sort of cultivate the diplomatic corps. There are a lot of hangers-on, as you well know. We began to understand some of the resentments and some of the complications that are the response of people, but we also were much impressed by the positive end of that, such as the landowner whose land was expropriated from him and given to his tenants, and the tenants came to him and said, "Who's going to lend us money like you used to, to buy our seed?" So he lent them money, because he looked upon them as family. It wasn't all exploitation.

We all tend to interpret things in terms of what we had experienced, and we hadn't experienced that extra human quality that the Arabs have. We found it very moving at times. I find this everywhere, I guess. People are so much more complicated than an easy evaluation of the situation can suggest, but you never get to learn all about people in any short stay. You have to learn more and more. So when I go to Africa people say, "Oh, you've been here so many times. You know all about this." I say, "No. Every time I go to any country, I learn some more that I didn't know before." Because you don't know until you have lived there, and the number of places where we've actually conducted a household is still very small.

Q: You had a very sort of tumultuous time with this to-ing and fro-ing. Were you PNGed [declared persona non grata], actually, from Syria?

SMYTHE: Not PNGed. They actually broke relations with the United States. It wasn't us; it was everybody.

Q: So the whole embassy had to go.

SMYTHE: Everybody had to go and they said we could leave our most junior officer to clean up. Hugh said, "Our most junior officer can't do it. He doesn't know what needs doing. We need our admin officer." So they agreed to let him stay.

Q: Who took over our interests in Syria?

SMYTHE: The Italians. Hugh took the flag with him when the embassy was evacuated, and the Italian flag went up before US personnel departed. We had known the Italian ambassador well enough and long enough. He was there the whole time we were there, so that the arrangements were not difficult to make.

Q: How do you decide who's going to take over your interests?

SMYTHE: I am not sure how that is decided.

Q: Sometimes it's the Swiss, but they charge more. I've been told they charge more. [Laughter] They've made a business of it, haven't they?

SMYTHE: I suspect what was done required some negotiations at the site, but also back in Washington. I don't really know how it's done. I had gone a day before the expression of unrest. I left, and, you know, it's one thing we never talked about.

The following is an excerpt from an interview of Ambassador Mabel Smythe by Ruth Stutts Njiiri in 1981.

Q: Can we go back now and talk a little bit about your experiences in Syria and Malta as the wife of Ambassador Smythe?

SMYTHE: I was ... once in a while I made speeches. For example, I think I mentioned that I went to Cyprus for a week to speak for the U.S. Information Service there and gave a series of talks on American education, which were of interest to the local people who were trying to work out an educational system that would serve the Greeks and the Turks, and otherwise suit Cyprus.

One of the speeches I made during that period was in Damascus. The Embassy had asked all officers to ... and dependents, anyone who had something to present, to give a series of presentations to Syrians. So I volunteered to do a talk on the American economic system. I'd been struck with the fact that people considered absentee landlords a great evil in Syrian society and one of the reforms was to get land out of the hands of absentee landlords. So they wanted to know how our absentee landlords fared and so on. And I had to explain that in the United States, this was not a major problem in the rural areas; that a great many people owned agricultural land, and there was not a problem of getting land, as there was in Syria. Even if you had money you couldn't buy land there, because all the land was attached to families and it was just not traded in.

So when I mentioned the fact that people could buy land and described a totally different system, they were intensely curious of how this came about. Anyway, that is ... the talk was not just about land; it was also about wages and economic aspirations and standards of living, and so on. People were fascinated by the differences in the two societies. And one man, thinking he was giving me a great, great compliment, said, "That is the best talk I've ever heard by a woman." ... (laughs). Syrians made no bones about their feelings that women were a separate category altogether.

Q: How did you fare with Syrian women?

SMYTHE: Very well. And there seemed to ... there were a great many Syrian women who were quite interesting and able people. There were not a great many professionals, but there were some. And when I was calling on the wives of the Cabinet Ministers, many of whom had relatively limited education in... in professional terms, I found them alert and lively, quite intelligent, and, very frequently, warm and human people. So it was ... it was extremely interesting to get to know them.

At the same time they didn't have the same aspirations as a whole that American women have and the idea of women's liberation, at that time, was not widely talked of in the United States. This way -- oh, three or four years before "women's lib", before there was enough momentum to make the kind of impact that it did in the following decade -- it was just beginning to be recognized in the United States -- we were aware of ... of the possibilities of chauvinistic attitudes. But it was really not until the '70s that many of us were thoroughly aware of the kinds of things that were happening around women.

So there wasn't a great deal of curiosity, and yet one Embassy wife told me that when news of our coming was publicized -- something was said in Hugh's swearing-in ceremony -- George Ball, who was then Under Secretary of State, said they were getting two for the price of one, because they had a professional woman of some competence. And one of our Embassy wives and her husband talked about what it would be like to have a sort of "blue-stockings" woman with a Ph.D. coming in. And they sort of groaned inwardly about the possibilities, but, of course, when we met we became firm friends. We had a great deal in common. But their impression of what kind of person I was going to be was a bit overwhelming for some reason.

I think that may have ... that may have been an example of the attitudes towards professional women in those days. It's only fifteen or twenty years ago, but it just seems that we have crossed an awful lot of ground historically since then.

Q: Did you find any curiosity there about black Americans?

SMYTHE: A great deal. I think wherever we have gone there has been a kind of apprehension that there might be a kind of abrasive element in the subject of black Americans. My own personal style and Hugh's personal style were to be forthright and tell people how we saw things. But it was not necessary to beat them over the head with it and get accusatory at the same time. So that we found it possible to talk with people in matter-of-fact terms about things which were capable of arousing a great deal of emotion, of having great emotional impact.

We had our hands full with the Arab-Israeli kind of conflict so that color conflict was not uppermost. It may have been the time in our lives when we had less consciousness of it than any other time; simply because this was not of great importance to the Arabs. They were interested, but it was not something that they had concentrated upon. They were much more interested in the religious differences and in the political concerns. So in a way we were relieved of some of the burden of educating people about color during that period. I remember a number of conversations in which they simply did not seem to attach much importance to color.

Q: Are you saying that they were not very concerned about the racial problems which existed in the United States?

SMYTHE: They were... they were not as aware of it as people in other parts of the world, and there were Syrians of quite a wide variety of colors. There were some intermixtures. You know all kinds of Muslims went through the Middle East going to Mecca and what not. There were slaves, both Arab and African slaves, held by some of the Muslims. And an intermixture would thrust itself upon your consciousness now and then when we'd go through a village where there seemed to be darker people than in other places. But the importance of the religion was such that it seemed to take priority over the physical characteristics. Now any gross difference in physical characteristics probably would have been different.

We had relatively few blacks in and around the Embassy, and the ones we had were people who got along very well with the local inhabitants ... and as a result, again, the issue simply didn't come up very often.

Q: Did you find a number of Christians in Syria and Malta?

SMYTHE: As I recall, about thirteen percent of the population was Christian, and there were churches that operated right in Damascus. There had not been as much religious intolerance as one might think. And our Armenian housekeeper, who was a Christian, told me a very interesting story about religion. There was a Jewish trader who was not far from the Embassy residence, and at a time of great stress, the Government ordered Jews to remain in their homes. And I believe at that time they were forbidden to carry on business; this was before we arrived. Our housekeeper was telling me about it. She said there were a number of Arabs who came to her and said, "We are suppose to pay him so many pounds each month on our unpaid bill. Would you take the money to him?"

And so she would collect the money and make a note of who gave her how much and carry it to him each month. And people felt that it was their obligation to fulfill their obligation to him even though this was a time of religious crackdown, when Jews were not going to be allowed to go about their daily business. So there was a kind of fairness in this Arab population. around us that seemed to cast aside religious and political differences and, by extension, racial differences, and do what they saw was necessary according to their code, their moral code.

We saw a good many examples of Christians who did whatever they wanted to do and, of course, a great deal of the diplomatic corps was Christian. They went to churches and there were no problems at all. Once in a while we had some of the priests in the Eastern Orthodox Church over, along with other people, for social events or something else, some gatherings, if we were presenting a cultural affair; if we had musicians. For example, we had the Roger Wagner Chorale. And we would invite the orthodox priests as well as other people to attend, and sometimes they did. They were an element of the community that was important.

Now a good many of the Palestinians who worked for the Embassy were Christians. And once in a while we had to go to a funeral or a wedding or something affecting the employees or acquaintances who were associated with the churches. And there was never any problem with

that. I did note, however, that our orphanage, about which I spoke, was not interested in having its children adopted by Christians, because these were Muslim children.. And one of the Fulbright professors suggested that he and his wife might be interested in adopting one of the children, and the Syrians indicated that they did not wish to have them adopted.

Q: Were there any black American Muslims who went to Syria while you were there?

SMYTHE: Not while I was there. I must say though, that there were some Jewish people who came to Syria while we were there. The first one was a rabbi who was visiting. He was coming about his own business and he wanted to visit the Jewish cemetery. The Government was a little curious about that, but they didn't create any problem for him.

A second person was a personal acquaintance of ours who was on a trip and got to the Middle East, so he thought he'd come across from Lebanon and spend a few days with us and did. He had no problems.

The third one was Barbara Tuchman, the author, whose publisher sent her on a trip through the Middle East. She had just published *The Proud Tower* then, and she and her editor were on a visit that took her from Beirut to Damascus. Then she was going by road to Jordan and through the Mandelbaum Gate into Israel, and that she did.

And we knew others who came, other people who came. So it was not... it was not as intolerant a situation as some people imagined it would be, though there was great opposition to anything Israeli. And we would sometimes... when we first arrived, our news magazines were forwarded through the APO, no, through the international mail system and they would sometimes arrive with the name Israel inked out on the pages so that we could not have a document that gave information about Israel circulating. They called it Palestine, always.

After we got addresses corrected so that our mail came through the Embassy pouch, then we had no problems there. But on the Syrian newsstands, any American newspaper or magazine would be censored before it was turned loose, and sometimes whole pages would be missing.

Q: You spoke very fondly of your work: with the orphanage. Were there any other programs in which you took an active role?

SMYTHE: One of my ... one of my other activities would probably interest you from the standpoint of its traditional nature. We had a diplomatic women's sewing circle that met about once a month. We would gather up sewing machines, needles and thread and materials and make little school dresses for poor children. And I remember going from one diplomatic home to another, and there'd be perhaps twelve or fifteen of us. The people with the machines would run up the side seams; the ones who had relatively little skill might simply attach ... would pin together things; and the ones with greater skill would sew them and so on. And we started out making layettes for babies. These were sent to hospitals, because many of the poorer Arab women were around at the hospital expecting a baby but with nothing to clothe the baby in, and they were given a little layette so they could dress the baby to take it home.

We solicited men's shirts, worn shirts, and when the collar was worn and they couldn't be used anymore, the rest of it made marvelous smocks for small children. We made many garments like that.

Then one day I was visiting a small town toward the south of Syria and went by the Catholic convent, where there were a number of poor children that we had been sewing for. And I was able to attend the first communion of a whole group of youngsters who were dressed in pink and white outfits that we had made for them. They were really quite attractive and the color was very nice. So we took pictures of these children and took them back to our sewing circle. That was one of the activities.

Another activity was simply learning about the culture, learning about the local arts and crafts. And one of the activities in which a number of people were engaged was collecting oriental rugs. There were several collectors. The Indian Ambassador collected about forty rugs while he was in Syria and probably has a very nearly priceless collection now. I was not deeply involved. I was learning first and then planning to collect later, and the Six-Day War interrupted that.

But it was fascinating to go into the souk, or market, and go through the, oh, perhaps ten or twelve miles of ... of covered streets where one could see everything under the sun being sold. There was a whole area that was for the artisans who made copper and brass, and one could watch them at their work. There was another area that sold antiques, another that sold food, then modern clothing, and there was even an area where one got books, paper and ink and pencils and that sort of thing.

The spice market was down the Street called Straight, where St. Paul went when he went through Damascus. And to go through places that had been traditional, that we had heard about for years and read about in the Bible, was quite an experience. There was a church which offered to tourists the window where St. Paul was let down in a basket to escape his enemies. And that obviously had been built long after the event; but it still brought back the old Biblical stories. So inevitably one got involved in antiquities, in history, and in archaeology.

One of the first outings I remember taking after I to Syria was to Resafa, to see a place where some of the events depicted in the Bible were said to have taken place. And to visit places that predated Christianity was a very rich experience.

One of the places I went to visit was a village, Maaloula, where they still spoke Aramaic, the language that Christ spoke. I believe it's the only place in the world where that language is still used. It was absolutely fascinating. When people came to visit us from the United States, it was one of my favorite places to take them for a visit. It took about an hour and a half or two hours to drive there, and then we would poke through the old ruins and see the caves where people had hidden away from their enemies. There was a place where sacrifices were made in pre-Christian days, human sacrifices, perhaps.

But it was an utterly fascinating land and a beautiful land. I found the beauty in the desert surprising. We who love to look at blue water and green trees and flowers can find another kind

of beauty in the wide spaces with not a blade of grass in sight, but the rolling hills and the stark bareness of the land. Very lovely indeed. It was an interesting place to be.

I found less beautiful the southern area where lava rock, almost black in color, lay all across the land, where to till a field, a farmer needed to push the rocks off to one side and very often had just small rock-strewn areas he could cultivate. But it would be green in the growing season. And these black rocks would remain there, reminding one that it was a fairly desolate place when the green things were not growing.

Syria had a prosperous farm economy. And the farm economy would keep the country afloat even if other things did not work out, if other things were going badly for them.

In going over the things that I've said, I've left out one thing, and that is the amount of help both of us have gotten from the support of other black people who applaud having recognition go to people that we believe in. Hugh got the cooperation of his peers because they respected him and they felt that he was honest in calling it the way he saw it and dealing with realities. And he didn't shirk something because it was difficult or painful. He felt that we needed to look at things as they were and cope with them or deal with them.

As a result, he had sterling support from fellow sociologists like Jim Moss and Hyland Lewis, from John Hope Franklin, from Kenneth Clark, from a whole spectrum of young people who had been his students and had admired him as a teacher and who applauded whatever he did. I think we can learn a lot from doing for each other, pushing each other's good points; making it possible to introduce other people to opportunities that seem suitable. He was always looking for jobs for people, looking for ways of using some black colleagues who deserved recognition, and I think that built both of us up. It built him up, but it also built other people around us up, so that together we could make some progress that we might otherwise not have been able to make. We sometimes have to allow for each other's handicaps and difficulties, but that kind of mutual support is the best antidote for prejudice that I know.

Having said this, I must not forget to mention one of the most influential people who became interested in him and believed in him was Mel Herskovits, who founded the first African Studies program in the United States. Hugh was the third Ph.D. to come out of that program, and Mel Herskovits was very proud of him and continued to be his friend to the end of his life. I think we last saw Mel Herskovits at the International Congress of Africanists in Ghana, in 1962. If I remember correctly, he died within twelve months of that meeting.

Q: Ambassador Mabel Smythe, I want to thank you very much for sharing these recollections with us about your husband,

Ambassador Hugh Smythe. On a personal note, I'd like to say that Hugh was a very good friend to me. I can verify the fact that he was so supportive of people who were trying to continue their education. I benefited greatly from his encouragement, and I want to thank you both for being so involved with all of us.

CHESTER E. BEAMAN
Deputy Chief of Mission
Damascus (1967)

Chester E. Beaman was born in Indiana in 1916. He received his bachelor's degree from Depauw University in 1938. His career includes positions in London, Wales, Cairo, Port Said, Philippines, Syria, and Malta. Mr. Stuart was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in September 1999.

BEAMAN: I considered it so. After I was promoted, I got an assignment as the DCM in Damascus. I left Manila and went directly to Damascus. I was due home leave and was a little concerned that I wasn't going to get it. I didn't get it for another year. In other words, it was three years that I was overseas, rather than two. But I had been selected as DCM. It was a step up based, I think, on various jobs that I had had for a while.

Q: You were there from 1967 to when?

BEAMAN: In Damascus?

Q: Yes.

BEAMAN: One month.

Q: I was going to say...

BEAMAN: We arrived, I think, in June. I guess it was early June, maybe late May.

Q: When you arrived, who was the ambassador?

BEAMAN: A fellow by the name of Hugh Smythe.

Q: What happened when you arrived? What was the situation when you arrived and then what happened?

BEAMAN: The day I arrived, the merchants were pulling down the shutters because the Army was angry. Somebody had printed an article (I forget whether it was in an Army journal or what) that said that God was dead. Of course, to the Muslims, this was anathema. There was public agitation about this statement. I arrived just at the time that all this was going on. I think what you're talking about was Syrian relations with the U.S.

Q: I think "Time Magazine" - this was one of these debates that was going on, the challenging and all. "Is God Dead" or something that was on the front cover of "Time."

BEAMAN: Yes. I arrived and the ambassador received me at the residence. It was a Sunday. He said that he had taken a long time to select me. He had gone through several files. I guess

that was supposed to make me feel good. I was thrown immediately into a lot of problems. We could see war was shaping up, even from the time I arrived. There was probably going to be an outbreak of war with Israel. This soon happened, of course. This was in 1967.

Q: What was Smythe's background?

BEAMAN: He was an economic specialist with the USUN in New York. I did not personally meet him there. I was in the audience when he gave a talk to our Basic Officers Course. He always claimed he was regular Foreign Service. He wasn't, but it did not matter. He was an ambassador. His wife was a nationally renown special educator. I was told President Johnson offered her an ambassadorial appointment. She declined, saying, "Appoint my husband instead." What was the Department to do? It appointed him. Why he took so long to select him another DCM I don't know. Like in Port Said earlier, the job had been long vacant. In fact, I was in Manila, and the former DCM, Hugh Appling, was actually assigned to Manila before I left. I had a chance to talk to him. He warned me that Ambassador Smythe would be demanding.

Q: I take it that relations between the staff and Smythe weren't very good.

BEAMAN: Now that you have brought it up, I guess I can talk. I was going to deal with Damascus without mentioning his name. I am convinced that even in Damascus he was suffering from cancer (He died of cancer a few years after he retired in 1969). One illustration of this was given by the Syrian foreign minister who was a former doctor. At the height of developing troubles, when President Johnson was sending telegrams urging everybody to stay calm, let's not have a war out of this, we had to deliver this message to the foreign ministry. While the ambassador was reading it, the foreign minister kept looking at him. After he had finished, the foreign minister asked, "May I touch you?" This was unusual. He walked over and felt the ambassador's neck under his chin and ears, and told the ambassador, "You ought to get that looked into." The ambassador apparently knew what he was talking about, that it might be cancer. He said, "Oh, yes. I'll have it taken care of." The foreign minister went back, sat down, and then answered the demarche.

In Damascus, the one big problem was that Ambassador Smythe did not want to evacuate. Everybody else, Americans in other Arab countries, were sending their dependents out. Ambassador Smythe didn't want to do it. Finally, the rest of the staff came to me and said, "We want to send our dependents out." We went in to the ambassador, all the officers, and said, "It's time to send them out." Well, the ambassador angrily dressed us down: "You people tell your wives things, and they get excited" and this, that, and the other. But at the end, he gave a nod to start what I called an echelon evacuation of dependents. I did not want to send my wife and children out first. I did not want the ambassador's wife to be sent first. I wanted the small children and younger wives to go first. We had to get approval from the foreign office to leave Syria. So we started sending them over to Beirut, the younger families first, and then working up. The day the war started, my wife and children and the ambassador's wife were going right toward the area where, supposedly, the Israelis were or would be rolling over the border. They were delayed a little because Mrs. Smythe sent her driver to go get some jewelry she had ordered in the souk. They did, and they somehow came

back to the embassy. The ambassador looked out the window and saw them. He rushed out, shouting, "Get out of here! There is a war going on!" I worried until evening when I could get in touch with my wife by telephone.

Q: They got to Beirut?

BEAMAN: They got to Beirut, yes. The next day, they and other American evacuees from several Middle East posts were taken to the airfield where PanAm chartered planes were waiting. There was no indication as to where each was going. My family was flown to Athens.

Q: How was it known that a war was going to start?

BEAMAN: There were several things. One was the usual criticism by Syrians and other Arab countries by radio, of Israel and the U.S. helping them. I think the Israelis went into Jordan first. Syria had broken diplomatic relations with Jordan, of all countries, because a Syrian man and woman were going across the border into Jordan presumably to assassinate King Hussein. The customs officials were examining the car when it exploded and killed a customs official. Of course, these people were immediately taken into Jordanian custody and questioned at length. So Syria because their people had been taken into custody, broke diplomatic relations with Jordan at a time when the war was imminent. It was primarily the acrimonious condemnation on radios that caused us to think war was coming. I was down in the souk one day, and I saw soldiers buying cardboard suitcases, a lot of them. What's this about? I immediately went to the embassy to put that on the record to add to a list of other indicators. Bob Paganelli was the second ranking political officer in those days. He later became ambassador to Qatar. He spoke Arabic well and kept phoning government officials to assure safety of the embassy.

Q: And later ambassador to Syria, too.

BEAMAN: Yes. He was an excellent ambassador.

Q: During the Reagan administration.

BEAMAN: Yes. In Damascus, we started getting messages from Washington saying: "Talk to the Syrians and try to get them to calm down and also deny that we're helping the Israelis." There was often bombast by Arab countries, but this time we felt it was serious. There usually was a lot of loud condemnation. This time it was being accompanied by troops mobilizing.

Q: And also the Israelis did a preemptive strike on Egypt, knocked out the Egyptian air force. This was after the UN had withdrawn its troops at Nasser's request from the Sinai.

BEAMAN: Yes.

Q: What happened to the embassy when the war actually started?

BEAMAN: First of all, we got our marching orders, so to speak. I was at dinner, so I wasn't at the embassy when the break came. The senior political officer was called over with the ambassador to the foreign ministry. The foreign minister delivered a message that we had 48 hours to get out. Of course, we let Washington know diplomatic relations were broken. By that time, most of the dependents were already on their way. It was only my family and the ambassador's that weren't. Then we started burning papers. I lived on a hill about 100 yards from the embassy, but I had to go down one street and backtrack to get to the embassy. As I turned the corner toward the embassy, there was a big demonstration going on. I rushed down. There was a big Syrian security officer telling our political officer, "We do everything we can to protect you and yet you're letting the Israelis know where you are." The smoke pipe on top of the embassy was glowing red. They interpreted this as our signaling the Israelis. Before we got out of there, the Israelis did strike at Damascus. I tried to get the female secretaries particularly to go down in the basement, but I couldn't get them to get as far back as possible. A few of us and the Marines were watching this from the top of the embassy. The Israelis came in and the first thing they did - on the hills were anti-aircraft guns and they came in and took out the anti-aircraft. It was right above us. It sounded like they were bombarding the embassy. The next thing they did, on the second run, was take out the oil storage tanks which were east of town. We could see the flames coming up. The third strike that they made was to bomb the airport. They really did a lot of damage, not necessarily on neighborhoods, but in strategic places. Some Syrians were standing on their balconies watching all this.

Meanwhile we were preparing to leave anyway. So, finally, we got everything lined up, and we left from the American school, not the embassy. I was the last one out of the embassy. When I walked away and looked back, the Italian flag was flying over the chancery. We left our administrative officer behind to work with the Italians. When I got to Rome, I worked with the Italians at the other end. Paul Deibel was the one left behind. When he got to Rome, he was a nervous wreck. There had been more bombing after we left.

In any event, on the evacuation, we were supposed to leave earlier than we did by a half hour or so and the Syrian police escort kept pointing up at the sun in the sky. It was well towards sundown when we got to the border. Our so-called "convoy director" was the economic officer. He refused to turn over the registrations of the embassy vehicles being demanded by the Syrians. So I listened to this and finally went and got the ambassador. I said, "You've got to come and put the convoy director right. The Syrians want the registrations and they won't let us go until they get them." When the ambassador came in, the Syrian officer stuttered, "Your man is excited." The ambassador said, "Give it to them." So we got to Beirut after dark. One of the problems in evacuating was trying to round up Americans. In the convoy, there were a few private Americans. Two of them were teachers at the American school. The American school had been collecting money for the next fall term. When we got on our way, these women suddenly said, "Oh, my Heavens, we left the tuition money in the school!" We could not do anything at that point. Also, somewhere along the line, they lost their air tickets. So we had to arrange to get new air tickets for them and advance them money to get to the States. It showed irresponsibility on their part.

Q: What about our consulate in Aleppo? Didn't they have problems?

BEAMAN: Oh, yes. That was the worst incident. I had been talking on the phone to Aleppo and one of the wives was saying that the husbands were up in the coderoom destroying documents. There was a big crowd out in front, a demonstration. They were concerned. I said, "Well, I'll arrange to call the foreign office on this immediately." Before she got off the phone, she said, "Oh, well, the police are coming now." She could hear the police sirens. So, I didn't think it was urgent, but I told Bob Chase, the senior political officer, and he in turn got in touch with the foreign office. Meanwhile, this mob had gotten into the consulate and had done some destruction. The main thing was what happened to the people. The men burned their hands going down a rope from the code room.

The mob destroyed things like stored Christmas decorations or looted personal items. But when the consulate reopened years later, bags packed with people's clothing were still sitting in a room. Officers and dependents headed toward Turkey. There was a military attaché who just happened to be there. He had been down in Damascus. He fainted right at the border and hit his head on the fender of the automobile. Of course, they had to take care of him. They finally got over the border, but they had the roughest time.

Q: Just to finish up this part, you went to Rome initially?

BEAMAN: Yes, I went to Rome. The ambassador after a few days went back to the United States, and I stayed in Rome about two weeks. We arranged for the Italians to take over the protecting power responsibility. This really had been arranged before we left.

Q: Yes. You mentioned that the Italian flag had already gone up.

BEAMAN: Actually, the Italian embassy overlooked the garden of our embassy, so it was a really good arrangement. The Department had informed us before we left that the Italians would take the protection. So I went with Deibel and the budget and fiscal officer, and we talked about what needed to be done. For one thing, we had a lot of refrigerators and stoves in storage to issue to people who didn't bring them with them. There was also a USIS building downtown that needed protection. One of the interesting things that I had not known until the last minute was that our political officer lived under a Syrian official. A bug had been put in the walls. They had to work to get that out of there before we left. This must have been a "need to know" act because nobody had told me about it until I wondered what they were doing.

We were in Beirut. It was Friday by that time. In the mosques, the mullahs were saying, "Strike at all things British and American." Several of us were having lunch with a friend of mine, Adrian Middleton, who was the DCM in Beirut. After an aide brought him a message, he said, "Don't even finish your lunch. I think you all ought to get out of here." So we gathered our personnel and flew out. The budget and fiscal officer had a lot of gold coins with him in a mail bag. I can remember his going up into the airplane - clink, clink, clink, up the steps. The ambassador, when we got in and got settled, was furious because the Russians were evacuating on the same plane. Once we got to Rome, he came back to Washington, and

I stayed behind with a few people to make the arrangements. Then I came back to the States also.

Q: Why don't we pick this up next time in 1967? You had been evacuated from Damascus. You've left Rome and you're now in the States.

Today is October 12, 1999. In 1967, what did you do?

BEAMAN: There is one item on the evacuation I think I should mention. It's an illustration of all the strings that you have to tie together. Before I left Damascus, the ambassador insisted that I be made treasurer of the American school board, which I was. As I told you earlier, in bringing out the teachers, they had left the fees behind. But there was about \$3,000 in a bank in New York. So, as soon as I got back to the States, I talked to the desk officer, and he referred me to some educational society in New York that handled matters about overseas schools. I made arrangements with them to take over the fund and administer it until such time as it was needed. I did that, and I gave the papers to the desk officer. But then later when the U.S. opened up diplomatic relations with Syria, I called the desk. I can't remember what year that was. I called the desk and told them about it. They had never heard of the arrangement. I said, "You've got \$3,000 there to start your school with." They took it over from there, I guess. It was just one of those things.

DAVID A. KORN
(Temporary Relocated to Syria to Prepare for Kissinger's First Visit There)
Beirut, Lebanon (1973)

Ambassador David A. Korn was born in Texas in 1930, and received degrees from University of Missouri and Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. After service in the U.S. Army, he joined the Foreign Service in 1959. Ambassador Korn's career included positions in Beirut, Tangier, Nouakchott, Tel Aviv, Calcutta, and Washington, DC, and ambassadorships to Ethiopia and Togo. He was interviewed in 1990 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: The peace process was sort of a peripheral role...

KORN: I had some part in it. I went down to Syria to prepare for Kissinger's first visit there, and was the first official American into Syria since 1967. I went to Geneva to the peace conferences which took place in December of '73 and did some work on the delegation there. Henry Kissinger was handling all of this. Sisco and Atherton were part of the process and they brought the rest of us in to a considerable degree, but most of this was Henry Kissinger's show.

Q: In Syria when you went were they uncomfortable dealing with Americans again?

KORN: They were very gracious. After I had had to deal indirectly with them over the two cases of arrested Americans, particularly the military attaché who was tortured, I didn't have a very good image of the Syrians, but they were polite to me. They wanted Kissinger to come. So they collaborated with the person who was sent there to set up a meeting. The atmosphere of the meeting was very good. Kissinger and the Syrians at the arrival dinner told each other dirty jokes and made lots of puns, there were lots of laughs. The thing that I remember most about Kissinger was when walking into a hall off to the side where the Americans went in, Kissinger stood there and looked out the window and said, "It is my destiny that brings me here." And I think that is the way that Kissinger saw himself.

KENTON W. KEITH
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Damascus (1974-1977)

Ambassador Keith was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. After graduating from the University of Kansas he served with the US Navy before entering the Foreign Service in 1965. An Arabic speaking Officer, Ambassador Keith served as Public Affairs Officer and/ or Cultural Affairs in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Syria, France and Brazil before his appointment as US Ambassador to Qatar. His Washington service included several tours in senior positions with USIA. Ambassador Keith was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1998.

Q: You left there in '74.

KEITH: Yes, in July of '74. Earlier that year President Nixon had visited Syria, ending a hiatus in diplomatic relations of seven years that followed the 1967 war. I got a telephone call from Washington offering me the opportunity to open the USIA post in Damascus. But I also was told that there were several other people who were in line and I had to tell them that day. So, I accepted the challenge. Who would not? It was a wonderful opportunity. I had about a month to organize myself to leave Morocco and go to Damascus.

Q: You were there from when to when?

KEITH: I arrived in Damascus in July of '74 and left in November of '77.

Q: And how long did you say relations had been shut down?

KEITH: Seven years.

Q: Why did we open them up? Something rings that Nixon made this trip to the Middle East maybe to get away from the heat at home.

KEITH: I have always kept separate in my own mind Nixon's travails at home and his achievements internationally. Nixon was a disaster on the home front and actually quite an able internationalist. His actions in Latin America were, I think, the continuation of a somber history of intervention and heavy-handedness, for example in Chile. But I think what he did in Syria was in the same philosophical vein as what he did with China. The Syrians in everybody's opinion were indispensable to any progress toward Middle East peace. They were then and are now. Nixon recognized that. He didn't simply appear at Damascus airport and say, "Okay, we're now going to open diplomatic relations." There had been a process of negotiating with the Syrians over disengagement of armed forces facing each other since the end of the '67 war. The measure of Hafez el-Assad had been taken by Henry Kissinger, and the judgment was that you may not agree with the Syrian president on important issues and you may not like him personally, but he had been shown to be a man of his word, someone who respected his commitments and had the strength to make them stick in his domestic situation. It made sense for Nixon to take this step, to make this gesture, which by the way, it was not a popular move in Israel. But he did it. He ushered in what was an extraordinary honeymoon period for the United States and Syria. It was the most fruitful period of engaging the Syrians in the peace process that we had seen. Those years of close relations would eventually come to an end as a result of developments in the Lebanese civil war. The Syrians entered that fray with our blessing, but as it turned out they pursued interests in Lebanon we opposed. There are many good books on that period. In general, I still think of that period in the mid-'70s as one of lost promise. We were on a steady negotiating track and our relations with Syria were developing in many areas. We had made enormous strides. A kind of understanding and trust occurred that was momentary but was real. It could have been exploited.

Q: While you were there, what type of work did opening up a place that had been shut down for a while require?

KEITH: One of the things that occurred to me when I first got into Damascus, one of the things that I observed was how eager the various institutions were to restore a relationship with the U.S. And this was despite the fact that Syria was a police state and people were still under close scrutiny. In many areas Syrians in positions of responsibility recognized that the country had suffered from a lack of contact with the U.S. over those seven years. Whether it was in the communications field, business, culture or higher education, the absence of an American connection had been keenly felt. For a number of reasons, the political realities of post '67 Syria fostered a reliance on the East for their international educational and cultural exchange. Even Syrians who had been able to study in the Soviet Union or East Germany sensed that they were being deprived of something important. They wanted to recover lost ground, and they wanted to do it as quickly as possible. There was a prevailing sense that we were in a honeymoon period and it might be fleeting. What they wanted to do and what I endeavored to do as much as possible was to create a kind of a safety net of institutional linkages that could survive a political break or a waning in our political fortunes. So, we had the university linkages. We established a scholarship program. A good friend in Beirut at the time who was working for AID, Tom Ball, an extraordinary man, controlled a number of scholarship grants to the American University of Beirut. With a telephone call and a quick trip to Beirut, I was able to come back with a pocketful of master's degree scholarships to AUB in certain development fields. So when I was making some initial calls at Damascus University I had something I could offer, and for the first time in

years Syrians went off to study under American sponsorship. Things were moving very quickly and Washington was very happy. That was a period of enormous fun. A very promising and optimistic period.

Shortly thereafter, a large AID mission was established in Syria, and we soon had a major development program there.

But of course, as we had predicted, our political entente came to an end and those relationships were tested. They survived one way or another for some years. Despite the fact that Syria has been on our terrorist list, we've had linkages and visits and so on, a relationship, often on life support, that has survived the political vicissitudes.

Q: Did you find yourself in competition with the Soviets?

KEITH: Yes, very much so. The Soviets took very careful note of what was going on and didn't like it. The Soviets helped some of their graduates and some of the products of their educational system organize a sort of university-wide institutional bias against Western graduate degrees.

Q: I would think, particularly given the background Syria and the residue of the late French and all that, that this would have been foreign to them.

KEITH: Well, there were a lot of entrenched interests in people who had come from the SU and other eastern countries. Our ambassador was Dick Murphy. I eventually convinced him that it would be in our interests to negotiate a cultural agreement with Syria. He was very suspicious of this and so was the Department as a whole, but we had had the experience of working in Baghdad with a cultural agreement that we used to carry with us on calls. When Iraqis would express apprehension about working with the U.S. we would take out this cultural agreement and remind them that our countries had pledged to work together in the cultural and educational field. I know that was a rather simplistic way of approaching it, but the act of establishing a cultural agreement with annual implementation meetings and reviews put in place a mechanism for our continued conversations in an area where we could certainly find some common ground. I think that has helped us over the years in Damascus and still is helping us.

Q: Why would there be opposition to it?

KEITH: When people think of cultural agreements, they don't think of the little ones that we have had with Syria and Iraq where you can do as much or as little as your resources dictate. They think instead of those big cultural agreements with China and the SU. I used to hate those because it meant that whenever a senior person, a president, went to visit Moscow, there wasn't a hell of a lot they could agree on but they always signed cultural agreements and those cultural agreements committed us to do certain things. Congress was quite pleased to see those cultural agreements put in place but they never voted any money to support them. So, the money had to be taken from the USIS budgets of other posts. Of course, that didn't make ambassadors very happy. So, there was a general anti-cultural agreement bias.

Q: Was there any opposition on the Syrian side?

KEITH: The Syrians actually wanted it. They Syrians were used to dealing with the SU and other countries where a cultural agreement was a standard way of operating. Curiously enough, the Syrians had not negotiated a cultural agreement with the Soviets. When we negotiated and eventually signed a cultural agreement, my Soviet counterpart, with whom I was on quite friendly terms, called me that very day was quite distressed. The Russians were quite put out that the Syrians had signed one with us before they signed one with them.

Q: The ones with China and the SU ended up an awful lot of tit for tat stuff. We send engineers; they send engineers.

KEITH: What we were interested in was actually getting Syrians to the United States and getting some American professors to Syria. We started very early with a very small Fulbright professor program. I was the beneficiary of the war in Lebanon when we had Fulbrighters there who couldn't stay because of the fighting. They were diverted to Syria and I was happy to have them. But that was our real push, to get Syrians moving to the U.S. and Americans coming to Syria. For so long, that had not happened.

Q: What were the Syrians interested in?

KEITH: The Syrian government was interested in medicine, applied science and engineering. They especially wanted a number of scholarships for medicine. We wound up having through the AID program a number of doctors studying in the U.S. Professors in the liberal arts wanted more scholarships, and so did I, but the money was in development assistance. Thus finding money for literature majors was tough. Nevertheless, I was happy to see students in any field going to the U.S.

Q: Did you find you had to tread carefully because of Israel watching over what we were doing?

KEITH: I didn't. Obviously, there was no Israeli presence in Damascus. However, it was not a secret that the Israelis looked upon our rapprochement with Damascus with some disquiet. But it also should not be forgotten that Israel was engaged, albeit indirectly, in security cooperation with Damascus. It is in this general realm that the Syrians were shown to be as good as their word. Assad promised to prohibit strikes on Israel by Palestinian groups from Syrian territory. That was in the '70s and here we are in the late '90s and I think even the Israelis would say that in all that time he has honored his commitment.

Q: The Jewish influence is so important in our political environment. has. I'm thinking about my time in Saudi Arabia back in the '50s. One had to be so careful. Did you find this a problem?

KEITH: Well, it's certainly a problem in the minds of Arabs that the United States is so pro-Israel. Even my closest contacts in Syria with people who had background in the U.S., perhaps an American degree or an American wife, always took for granted the pro-Israeli bias on the part of the U.S. The underlying question was, given that pro-Israeli bias, is there something of value for Arabs in a relationship with the U.S.? If you wasted your time by arguing that there was no

U.S. bias toward Israel, they would simply say, “Here are the statements. Here are the public statements.” This was the history. You don’t waste much time trying to rewrite it.

Q: How did Dick Murphy operate?

KEITH: Dick Murphy was a great representative of the U.S. in Syria. Assad trusted him. He was able to talk to Assad in Arabic. His Arabic was good enough that it alone was a building block in our relationship with Syria. That can’t be overemphasized. I think Dick Murphy was regarded by his political officer as doing too much of the political work and he certainly did a lot of it. The bulk of the political reporting that came out of the embassy was his. Certainly the most important of the political reporting that came out of the embassy was his. Murphy was not a one dimensional ambassador who only cared about the political. He knew the importance of establishing an aid relationship, an economic relationship, and the importance of trying to change some of the Syrian laws that stood in the way of an expanding cultural relationship. He understood the importance of a cultural and education ties, and he worked hard in those areas. Some of my colleagues at the embassy complained that Murphy kept too much work for himself. But I saw a well-rounded ambassador who didn’t lose sight of what he thought was the most important thing at that moment in history, and that was establishing an effective relationship with Hafez el-Assad, but who also gave a lot of time and direction to the major areas of our efforts in Syria. Concerning the everyday management of the embassy, he put a lot of well-deserved trust in his Deputy Chief of Mission, the very able Bob Pelletreau.

Q: What was our estimate of Assad, what he was after and what his survivability was?

KEITH: Survivability was... In Syria in the ‘70s, you didn’t make many judgments on survivability. Every day that he was in power, he was setting a new record. Syria before Assad had never been described as a model of political stability. But we looked at Assad as an intriguing figure. A lot of people don’t remember that in September 1973 when the Black September confrontation took place between the Jordanian government and the Palestinians in Jordan, the Syrian president at the time dispatched troops to assist the Palestinians. Assad, who was the air force commander, refused to go along with Syrian intervention and withheld the air power to support it. That precipitated a crisis in the government and he emerged the big winner. An intriguing figure.

Q: The confrontation with Islamists in Hama, had that happened?

KEITH: No, that came after my time in Syria. Assad was an Alawite, a sect viewed by strict Sunni Islam as heretical. He was against political Islam, against fundamentalists, and fought them. Indeed, he was fairly ruthless in his effort to neutralize organized opposition to his government and its Baathist ideas. He was in firm control of Palestinians who were in his territory. Despite his arms dealings with the East, he suppressed organized communism in Syria and jailed communist figures. He had shown that he could be trusted once he had made his commitments, which were not easy to come by.

In the Lebanese civil war, we thought that he had, at least in the beginning, done what we wanted him to do. When Syrian troops poured across the border, their initial goal was to save the

Christians from annihilation in Beirut. For those reasons, Assad was an intriguing figure. Most ambassadors who have been through there have suffered to some extent from the accusation that they were hoodwinked by this monster. I don't think so. People like Chris Ross, Talcott Seelye, and Dick Murphy are sharp observers and good analysts and I think over the years they've seen what Assad is. They know his shortcomings and nobody denies that there are thuggish tendencies in his government. Nobody denies that the man has supported acts of terrorism. Nobody denies that Assad is a bad guy in some ways. But also, nobody denies that he has brought certain things to the table that we like and that in any case, moving forward in the peace process requires his cooperation. In the end, it will require his cooperation. Secretary Shultz miscalculated when he thought that solutions could be reached without the Syrians.

Q: He was told by Ambassador Paganelli that Assad wouldn't buy into this agreement and Paganelli was lynched because he was telling them how Assad would react, which was exactly the way he reacted.

KEITH: Of course.

Q: Was American culture – movies, magazines, etc. – allowed in there?

KEITH: It was a slow process. No, not movies. Television, yes. American television series. I got involved in that because the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) was trying to negotiate from their offices in Rome an agreement with the Syrians to bring American cinema back to Damascus. But they had another agenda and that was that the MPEAA wanted to be able to deal directly with cinema owners and the theater owners and not with the government. The Syrians were not going to budge on that, though we had lots of talks.

Q: What was the issue? Was it Israeli influence?

KEITH: I don't think so. I think that was part of the MPEAA agenda – not just in the Middle East, but all over the world.

Q: But so many governments had pretty strong central control.

KEITH: Yes. MPEAA was ready to temporary compromise, but the Syrians weren't interested in compromise. My negotiating partner at the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance (wonderful title, no?) told me one day he had no maneuvering room whatsoever. "The Party won't accept." So when I departed Syria there was still not American cinema on theater screens.

Q: Were there any particular problems that you had in Syria?

KEITH: There were always layered throughout the government people who really were opposed to this new liaison with the United States. You never knew when you were going to run up against this, when for no apparent reason, some project or some program would run into an inexplicable delay or some document that was necessary didn't materialize. Yes, there was always that. This was not necessarily government policy, but it was a heavily bureaucratic state.

Q: Some ayatollah.

KEITH: Less an “ayatollah” in the Syrian context than a “revolutionary.” But the fact is that the Syrian government -- Hafez el-Assad, and his lieutenants and the people around him -- were less ideologically committed to the old Baath Party tenants. They had long since come to compromises with the basic tenants of Arab socialism. But there were people who were true believers and they were the ones who you often ran up against.

Q: What about the Iraqi connection, did that appear at all?

KEITH: The rivalry between Iraq and Syria was deep and bitter. Both the Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties sprang from the same political wellspring that emerged among Arab students debating in French coffeehouses in the '20s and '30s. These discussions were led by people like Michel Aflaq, a Christian Syrian who preached a kind of secular Arab socialism and renaissance. Secularism was important because many of these intellectuals were not Muslims and they tended to regard religion – not just Islam, but Christianity as well – as a counterrevolutionary force. So, that secular component was very important.

Also, they believed in a kind of pan-Arabism in which national borders were inconveniences. They certainly believed in civilian control and the importance of civilian philosophical and ideological direction. Having said all of that, the split between the Iraqi Baath Party and the Syrian Baath Party was much more complex, and had probably less to do with ideological differences than other things, and was in the end more a personality conflict than any ideological one. But it was nonetheless real. It has proven to be very persistent. You look at the fact that some of the old philosophers, the old ideologues, of the old Baath Party gravitated to Baghdad rather than Damascus in their later years. Some people might be tempted to say that would indicate that the Iraqis are more ideologically pure. That's nonsense. Neither side is ideologically pure. Neither side represents the model the old thinkers were trying to put together. The Baath Party of today in its two centers of strength bears no resemblance to its founding ideology.

Q: I wouldn't think this would have much to do with our relations with Syria.

KEITH: No, not really. Of course, there were ideologues who still were associated with political slogans and political platforms and they were not particularly pro-American. In some ways, they were useful to Assad when he needed to truck them out. But they really were not decisive in our relationship or even very important.

Q: You mentioned that the Peace Corps was rather important.

KEITH: Not in Syria. We didn't have Peace Corps in Syria. That was in Morocco. I think the Peace Corps was extremely important in Morocco, as it was in Brazil and many other place, but it never existed in Syria.

Q: Because of a bias towards Israel, did you find that in political campaigns or what have you, our relationship with Israel would be trotted out?

KEITH: Our support for Israel was always a factor in public discourse. It was always present in the press and on Syrian TV. Interestingly, during that period the Syrians were relaxing control over what media material came into the country. They allowed the importation of Time and Le Monde and a few west European newspapers and journals. (Not, however, the International Herald Tribune) But they remained very sensitive to coverage of regional affairs and practiced an awkward form of censorship.

In a short time they shifted gears and decided to reach out to the western press. I was called in and told by the man who was in charge of their international press relations opening to the press and their relationship with the Western press and I was told that the president had decided to do some interviews. They had a list of American and wanted me to rank them in importance. Thus began Assad's outreach. They would call me in and ask, "Is this person sufficiently important for the president to give his time to?" And they were most eager to see what was actually printed. With time they became more knowledgeable and they didn't need me for that, but at the beginning, they did; they didn't know anybody in the American press and simply categorized it as a Zionist propaganda arm. Also, they were interested in what various politicians were saying and they were able to identify where their issues intersected with the issues of particular policy makers in the U.S. Steve Solarz, for example,. His district had probably the largest concentration of Syrian Jews in the U.S., and the plight of Syrian Jews was a major issue for us. It was the subject of a potent "60 Minutes" report.

Solarz visited Damascus a couple of times while I was there to discuss the issue with the Syrian government. The Syrians were hesitant to receive him, but eventually allowed the visits and gave him full access.

Q: They had an issue about marriages.

KEITH: Marriages of Jewish women. This was the focus of the "60 Minutes" story. Mike Wallace came in.

Q: "60 Minutes" is a news program and had a reputation of sort of ambushing people. Did you have any problems with that?

KEITH: No. Wallace actually did a reasonably good job. I think his production and the key production people who came in were particularly good. One was Christine Ockrent, the Belgian who eventually married Bernard Kouchner, the man who created Doctors Without Frontiers. She has become a media star in France but in those days she worked for CBS in those days. The Syrians were satisfied that the story was balanced.

But it wasn't all peaches and cream. The secret police were excessive every now and then. Nick Ludington, an Associated Press reporter, was beaten up and taken to jail. In fact, I was having lunch with Christine Ockrent when I got the call that he was in jail. I immediately called the press liaison and the reporter was freed very quickly. It was a case of poor coordination within the Syrian government. It was certainly an act that went against their effort to open up to the western press.

Q: Where did you go when you left Syria?

KEITH: I came back for my first Washington assignment.

Q: You came back in '77.

KEITH: That's right.

MICHAEL METRINKO
Consular Officer
Damascus (1976-1977)

Michael Metrinko was born in Pennsylvania in August 1999. He received his bachelor's degree from Georgetown University in 1968. His career includes positions in Turkey, Syria, Iran, Poland, Afghanistan, Israel, and Yemen. Mr. Metrinko was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy August 1999.

Q: Why don't we talk about Damascus and then save Iran because we want to go in depth on that. What did you do in Damascus. You were there, when in '76?

METRINKO: I arrived in Damascus in November of 1976, and I was there until March of 1977.

Q: What were you doing there?

METRINKO: Straight visa work. I was the NIV officer. It's a good post. I had been accustomed in Ankara to dealing with four to five visa applications a day. There was very little consular work in Ankara. Most of the consular work was in Istanbul. When I got to Damascus, I did straight visa work. There were two American officers in the section. It was a nice section, very pleasant, and we had the Beirut files there, at least part of them. People from Lebanon would come to Damascus for visas. We also dealt with the Syrians. We were doing, I guess, oh, between 70 to 90 applicants a day, which at first I was horrified at and then found I could do quite easily in the morning and process the paperwork in the afternoon. I had a very good time. It was a job that started in the morning, ended in the evening. The embassy was hospitable. It was an extremely professional embassy.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

METRINKO: The ambassador was Richard Murphy. The DCM was Bob Pelletreau.

Q: Oh, yes.

METRINKO: Two Middle Eastern hands, two of the best.

Q: Two of the top people.

METRINKO: They were a great team. They were extremely professional. They were friendly. They were both hospitable. I'm trying to think. There were other people in the embassy - good Lord, Jim Cooper was the political counselor, again, very good. Jim Budeit was my boss temporarily, and then Seton Stapleton, again, especially Seton, very competent, professional officers. We had a good time. I met Americans who were there. I met an American friend who was doing a Fulbright study of the archeology of Damascus. We got along very, very well, and he introduced me to some other budding young archeologists, and I had some Syrian friends, actually, young ones, and also met a couple of Hungarians who were there doing Arabic studies, and had a great time. Many weekends, with a couple of this group, either one of the Dutch archeologists or the American or the Hungarians, I would change my clothes in the embassy on a Friday afternoon, leave my suit there, put my jeans on, and go hitchhiking around the country for the weekend. I hitchhiked all over Syria.

Q: I would have thought Syrian secret police would have been all over you.

METRINKO: Interesting thing about Syria. We were just reopening Syria. We had reopened there in, I think, '74 or '75. I got there a year later. The Syrians were actually very pleasant. They had been very anti-American during the '67-73 period, but the Syrians are correct. I mean, they're correct in the sense of their behavior. There was no outward harassment at all. The people of Syria... There were no tourists in Syria at that point, nothing at all. People simply didn't come there, and this meant that you were welcomed if you were a tourist. The normal Syrian didn't really know very much about the United States, and instead of loving us or hating us, the general reaction was, "Oh, you're an American - that's nice." There was no emotion about it. I found that very pleasant. I had a good time, saw the entire country. I was in the towns, the villages, overnight in Arab houses and other things. I could do this on weekends, come back, have a normal embassy life. And actually, the RSO once, I said -

Q: Regional Security Officer.

METRINKO: I asked him, what would his reaction be if I told him that the vice-consul was out hitchhiking with Hungarians who were there on Communist Party scholarships and going out with local Syrians and hitchhiking around the country and basically coming back to the embassy on Monday morning to start work again? And he would say, "I would prefer that he didn't tell me. I had a great time.

Q: Did you pick up any of the mood from people you were talking to about how they felt about Assad and all?

METRINKO: No, Syrians did not discuss politics with me. I had a great social life, but kept it off politics there. And I didn't know enough about that situation. I had very basic Arabic. I spoke a lot of Turkish and Persian, especially in the embassy, where so many people were Armenian and spoke Turkish, but didn't really touch on politics. Somehow, you know, I liked Syria, but it never affected me deeply. It was a pleasant place for six months. I had a great social life, a lot of young people in the embassy and a lot of young people outside the embassy. I had no ties to the

place. I was not trying to live there. I knew it was going to be a six-month assignment, and it was absolutely great.

WILLIAM PIERCE
General Service Officer
Damascus, Syria (1976-1978)

Mr. Pierce was born and raised in Georgia and educated at Davidson College and the University of Georgia Law School. Entering the Foreign Service in 1973, he was first posted to Surabaya, Indonesia, followed by a tour at Damascus, Syria. After completing Arabic language studies in Washington and Tunis, Mr. Pierce was assigned as Political Officer to a number of Arabic speaking posts, including Khartoum, Jeddah and Riyadh. In Washington, Mr. Pierce dealt primarily with Middle East Affairs. His final post was Surabaya, where he was Consul General. Mr. Pierce was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2001.

Q: Bill, you were in Damascus from when to when?

PIERCE: I need to correct that. In the summer of '76.

Q: Summer of '76, okay. You were there from '76 to when?

PIERCE: Until '78.

Q: What was the situation with Syria when you arrived in '76?

PIERCE: In '76 the relationship had taken a turn for the good. Kissinger had been through I think in the year previous, or perhaps earlier, doing a lot of shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East and had agreed to restore a full embassy. Ambassador Richard Murphy had gotten there just before I had, and we had the beginnings of a rather, for Syria, large AID (Agency for International Development) mission. Well, relatively large – maybe 20 people ultimately. So the relationship was on an upswing when I got there.

Q: What was Damascus like? How did you observe the Syrian role in all of that when you arrived there?

PIERCE: I was struck by two things. Firstly, so much of the city, which is quite beautifully set, was surrounded by Socialist architecture buildings – rather non-descript, very grey. The other thing is the extensive, pervasive presence of what people there call “G2,” in other words the internal security agency. I think there must’ve been about four. But you’re first taken aback by their presence on street corners and in front of houses of prominent people and offices. Armed thugs basically. Not in uniform but sporting what always looked like submachine guns.

Q: Were there a lot of pictures of Hafez al-Assad around?

PIERCE: I never noticed any great degree. I mean, yes, of course there were, but it didn't seem as pervasive as it might have. Every office building, from time to time, on streets, but not, going to my mind, a real glorification cult. There were occasional incidents where you could learn of violence in the city: assassinations, bombing attempts, and also reported examples of internal security getting rid of people. It was unusual seeing all the embassies of countries that we have no relations with there: the Cubans, the North Koreans.

Q: The North Vietnamese probably at that time.

PIERCE: I don't recall. They must've been, but I'm not aware of them. And the East Bloc in profusion.

Q: Yes. What was life like there? I mean just sort of personal life at this point.

PIERCE: I didn't have much; as GSO I worked quite hard. We were in the midst of expanding at a time in which the economy was just starting to have a construction boom and one of my main jobs was finding housing leases; negotiating leases with landlords mainly for the AID mission. There was, in that sense, sort of an economic boom, although in reality the economy never was much of anything. Of course the currency was controlled and the rate of exchange artificially high.

Q: Did you find that you or members of the embassy were particularly harassed or given a difficult time by the security people?

PIERCE: It's my impression that the security people, the G-2, had extreme interest in us. They were always on the lookout for Americans in the embassy or any hint of behavior they didn't like, for any indication of any type of conduct that would be considered unsavory. Sexual deviancy was seen to be a preoccupation of theirs. I in GSO had probably the best contact with the local FSNs in the embassy. They were required every four years, I believe, to go to G-2 and get cleared to work for us and during this process they were always interrogated or asked questions. One of them was bold enough to tell me what happened when he went. Basically what they would do was list to him all the single members in the embassy and say, "What do you know about them?" and in this particular conversation he told me he didn't know anything untoward about them, but they were always listed. As for myself, I'm aware that my apartment was entered by G-2.

Q: You were a bachelor at the time?

PIERCE: I was a bachelor at the time.

My apartment was entered by G-2 when I had a maid there. She was taken out – this happened probably twice – for one or two hours, how long I don't know, and obviously they had free run of my apartment. I found this out several months after this occurred. This was a time I began dating the person who I was to marry.

Q: This was?

PIERCE: My wife, Daad.

Q: And her background...

PIERCE: She was Lebanese. She worked at the embassy in Beirut and when the embassy went down to a skeleton crew with no outside operations, she was given the option either of going back home near Sidon on leave without pay until further notice, or working TDY (Temporary Duty) for the embassy in Damascus – and that's where we met. The internal security picked up on our meetings and began harassing her. It may have been at that time that they began harassing me through my apartment, I don't know. When the harassment against her became direct, she quit and went back to Lebanon.

Q: You know, one is so used to the Soviet style thing where a bachelor or a married man would be...you know ladies would show up at the door and ring the doorbell and say, "Could you help me?" or something like that. Was there any of this sort of "honey trap," I think the term is?

PIERCE: Not that I'm aware of. She was interviewed by internal security and it was a quite difficult, extremely tedious task for her. It frightened her very severely.

Q: I'm just trying to pick up the different styles. This was not a Soviet style thing of trying to hand off documents or things. In other words, to compromise you and then to...

PIERCE: No. Not that I'm aware of.

Q: You were working with AID rather closely. How did they find working in Syria?

PIERCE: Again, the conversations I had with AID on how they worked didn't reveal any great different style. I mean I wasn't interested in what they were doing. It was a third-world country; it had an awful lot in terms of economic development needs. Our program was modest although the personnel resources AID put there were large. I don't have any idea of what precisely they were doing.

Q: During your time there were you able to get out and travel around much or were you pretty well kept in Damascus by your work?

PIERCE: I traveled quite a lot on the weekends, doing a lot of what tourists do. Indeed Syria is very beautiful, even day trips out of Damascus. You could go to the north and over toward the coast there's a crusader castle, Krak des Chevaliers. Actually it's not on the coast but it's maybe within 15 miles of the coast. You could go down south to As Suwayda where there is a coliseum. Basra, which was extremely attractive. The town of Homs had reasonably good diversions, nothing much there. It's sort of famous for being a town of dunces.

You can take a trip, which I did, across the desert to Palmyra. The conventional way was too long, but I tried the short cut and we made it there. The Palmyra ruins of – I'm trying to think of

the name of the kingdom – Queen Zenobia. Basically 4th-century A.D., subdued by the Romans. I took longer trips to Aleppo, once on official business to survey our burned-out consulate there. The Syrian mobs burned that out in 1967. I also took a trip over to Deir ez-Zor on the Euphrates, about a three-and-a-half, four hour drive east of Aleppo. It is an old archeological site, the Kingdom of Mari, I think. That was the one that was being excavated. Extremely interesting, just very, very deserty. On the coast Al Hamidiyah. Aleppo also is inland. On the coast the cities of Latakia, Banias, and Tartus. Very, very interesting. Very pretty places. Extremely green and filled with archeological treasures. Very nice place.

Q: Did the fact that Syria and Iraq had poor relations reflect itself while you were there?

PIERCE: It goes up and it goes down. At the time I was there it was down. Not to any great degree as I recall. There are a couple of things perhaps in the back of my memory suggesting that yes, you were aware of it but it was not as though it was a hot topic amongst people. It was all sort of rivalry within the Baath Party and whose Baath leader was following which line of Baathism at the time. Sure, it always pervaded the atmosphere, but it wasn't a day to day problem, or of interest to me.

Q: What about the situation in Lebanon? What was it at that time?

PIERCE: Lebanon had fallen into chaos or was beginning to fall into that long, long period of what they used to call “igar rabat,” the troubles. When I first got there, or shortly after I got there, was when our ambassador there and econ counselor were murdered. And that's when the embassy closed its operations, leaving a skeleton crew. They no longer used any form of exit out of Lebanon except for Damascus, so therefore over the next six months or so we became their logistics pipeline. The bodies of our two dead diplomats were carried out to Damascus and put on aircraft – I think they were C-130s – which we had arranged to come in on special dispensation into the airport to take them out. I stand corrected. I'm not sure about that. The two aircraft did come in bringing armored cars and we used them to pull out household effects that had been left in Beirut when the evacuation occurred out of the embassy, which was just prior to that. The only problem with the armored cars was there was absolutely no clearance into Syria for them and we had to keep them in Damascus for eight or nine months, I believe, before we could get enough documentation to move them into Beirut. The cars were Ford LTDs and heavily armored. The irony of it was that they were so quickly assembled, or quickly prepared, that they didn't even have sufficient brakes to stop with all of the extra weight they had. When they finally went to Beirut over the mountain, it severely hampered their ability just to get through safely.

We went to Beirut or into Lebanon twice, once through the embassy and once in an attempt to get some equipment that we needed commercially. On the first occasion we had maybe 20 people there overnighted. The second time when I went into a different part of Beirut – the outskirts of Beirut – I was very impressed. Always you had Syrian checkpoints at that time; Syria had begun occupying the place more extensively. On one occasion I was stopped by a Syrian and asked where I was going and I told him, and he said, “Well, there's going to be a battle there in about a half an hour.”

I felt that was very nice of him to tell me that and I didn't go. *(laughs)* On another occasion we were allowed from time to time to go into Shatura, just across the border in Lebanon, to buy foodstuffs since we couldn't get a lot in Damascus. Again, we had a few Syrian checkpoints and at one occasion came to a Syrian checkpoint just on the other side of the border into Lebanon and there was this sort of typical Syrian guard who looked like, "What the hell am I here for stopping cars?" We came up to him, and he was one of my FSNs who had been dragooned into the military four months earlier and there he was in the middle of nowhere, stopping cars.

Also at the time, as I got to know my wife better and we became more involved, she would frequently go home to Lebanon and she lived in the south not too far from Sidon. To me it was always aggravating and very disturbing that she would take these trips by taxi – there was a very good taxi network between Sidon and Damascus – and she always said it was no problem. And even the days that Beirut was closed, the taxis would veer off through the mountains in the southern part of Lebanon to get to Sidon. She convinced me – this was after our Damascus tour, we did visit her family in the south – aside from that, the situation in Damascus was driven by the situation in Beirut. The hotels and houses were rented by Lebanese trying to take refuge in Damascus. Hotels were full of Lebanese who had fled. Obviously the richer would go to Europe or elsewhere, but a large number were in Damascus. Our consular section was inundated by Lebanese trying to get visas to America, which was very hard for them – as were the consulates in Amman and Nicosia and Athens.

Q: You mentioned the burning out of our consulate in Aleppo. Were we thinking of opening it up or...

PIERCE: I don't think we ever were. The Syrians, at least as far as I could tell, were very interested in seeing us return. On my visit to Aleppo, I had frequently expressed to me their desire to see us return. What we were interested in mainly was obviously to get recompense for the damage that was done to the consulate. One of the interesting things was when we closed relations in '67, or when the Syrians truncated relations, most of our FSNs went on leave without pay until further notice; very few were left as caretakers in Damascus. Since our consulate in Aleppo was destroyed – burned out – I don't believe anybody who was there was left to look over our interests. When I came there we hired two or three FSNs from Aleppo – not in Aleppo, but they had to work for us in Damascus. One of them told me a very interesting story; he was in B & F.

Q: Budget and Fiscal.

PIERCE: Yes, in Damascus. I'm not sure what he was in Aleppo. He said that in Aleppo the day of the burning all the FSNs worked on the first floor, all of the Americans worked on the second floor. When the mobs came out in front it got very, very tense. And then he told me, "All you Americans scooted out the back," through a special ladder or a rope down the window, "We FSNs on the first floor," when they started throwing the gasoline bombs in the windows, "we had to go out front and meet the crowds." There was a certain amount of bitterness on the part of how FSNs were treated and what the U.S. was doing to help them in a situation which they, with justification, believe was not of their own making but was because of their ties to America.

Another FSN in our customs office – our customs clearances guy – he was in Damascus and when the embassy was closed, he was taken and beaten severely about the head to the point that he lost much of his hearing. A lot of them suffered a lot because of Syria-America relations.

Q: You were there when the Carter administration was coming in. Were there any high-level visits?

PIERCE: We had one Vance visit and I guess it would be pre-Camp David. The most interesting thing in respect to the Middle East peace that I recall – and again, not being in the political section – is the Egyptian ambassador's residence was not too far from our office, and where our office still is today. And shortly before Sadat went to Camp David – is my guess – he came to Damascus and Assad tried to convince him to do otherwise. Obviously Assad failed. Within an hour after Sadat had left, a bomb exploded on the front door of the Egyptian residence which unfortunately for us is in the area in which we had a lot of houses. In fact one man in particular had just missed being in the pathway of the bomb by five minutes.

Q: How was morale in the embassy and how was Ambassador Murphy?

PIERCE: Ambassador Murphy is an extremely unified person. He had, obviously, great experience, and I think he was esteemed by the people in the embassy – the Americans and the FSNs. He was just a very towering man, very impressive. That was always conveyed to me. His DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) was Robert Pelletreau at the time. Again, both extremely nuanced, experienced Arabists. As DCM he was an exemplary leader of Americans and I think in charge of making sure morale of Americans and FSNs was kept as high as possible. I think he did a very good job at that.

Q: You left there in '78.

PIERCE: Yes.

Q: Did you get any feel about Israel and relations with Israel and all; I mean the lack thereof, or what have you?

PIERCE: No. It was interesting in the sense of the two passport policy. We've had a two passport policy that was extremely important, I think in terms of how we related to Damascus. The Syrian immigration is very nuanced on checking on our passports to see if we traveled to Israel a lot. On one occasion a person in the embassy who went to Cyprus then went to Israel for personal reasons. Although the Israelis, if asked, would not chop our passports in or out, the Syrians, when you returned, were able to figure this out, and they would not let him back in. This was just one day to day aspect of the relationship. I'm not aware of any deeper currents at the time.

Q: What about the military presence while you were there; was there an obvious Syrian army and Soviet connection?

PIERCE: Only in internal security. When we had Vance come – and I noticed it when other dignitaries would come – the road to the airport is maybe 20 kilometers, maybe not that long – it's quite interesting when you drive out to the airport two hours before a VIP (Very Important Person) is coming you begin to see along this stretch of several kilometers the emplacement of internal security about every quarter mile. They had an awful lot of manpower devoted to this. Syrian military units were not pervasive, did not seem to be omnipresent there, except for internal security. The farther away from Damascus you would get, the less security would be visibly present. In Aleppo, yes you would see them from time to time, but you wouldn't have that every street corner presence of a goon with a submachine gun.

Q: What was your impression – being GSO you'd be probably more aware of this than most – of the Syrian economy? I mean how did the average Syrian do there?

PIERCE: It would be my impression that it wasn't very well. I mean the average Syrian was poor in the sense of being unable to buy an awful lot of foodstuffs. The average Syrian, as well as Lebanese as I found, did not have adequate heat; the price of "mazut," diesel, the price of heating equipment was too high. Clothes were reasonably cheap, primarily, as I recall, imported from Eastern Europe. Medicines, were reasonably cheap although perhaps not for their income. At the same time you had a very visible strata of well-heeled Syrians: Mercedes, luxurious houses, exorbitant cost of land. Land was about the only thing that was left in the economy that the government didn't regulate or own. Consequently speculation on land and building apartments was a major occupation of people who had Syrian pounds.

MORRIS DRAPER
Near Eastern Affairs, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon
Washington DC (1976-1978)

Morris Draper was born in California in 1928 and graduated from the University of Southern California in 1952. An Arabic language officer, Mr. Draper served in a number of Middle East posts including Beirut, Baghdad, Jeddah, Ankara, Jerusalem, and Washington, DC. Mr. Draper was interviewed in 1991 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Then you moved over to become country director from 1976 to 1978. Looking at this list of names I can't think of a more god awful combination, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Talking about moving from the eye of the hurricane right into the hurricane.

DRAPER: The Lebanese were then going on as in the past. Jordan was a bright spot, but we were having our problems with Jordan for they were seeking more arms and more security vis a vis Israel. We were bumping up against the supporters of Israel in that respect. Our relations with Syrian were kind of interesting. This is another place where Henry Kissinger sort promoted a modest aid program. It was quite substantial. We had some interesting people in Washington who were content to go along with it, allotting money to Syria for behaving itself and holding to the withdrawal agreement. The AID people in the woodwork were making sure that no real

money was being spent in Syria.

Q: The program was sort of a quid pro quo?

DRAPER: It was a *quid pro quo* for the withdrawal from the Golan Heights and the easing of tensions. This was pre Camp David. We were very interested in maintaining the relationship in preventing another outbreak. And we were kind of hopeful Assad was a pragmatist and that under certain circumstances he would work something out with the Israelis. Of course Syria was vitally concerned with stability in Lebanon. In the summer of 1976 we squared a three way deal with the Christians, the Syrians and ourselves. There was a lot of very interesting things going on and it is still true fifteen years later.

Q: You were hoping that Assad, as a pragmatist, might recognize Israel.

DRAPER: Not recognize Israel as much as striking a deal with that country. We had some hopes which were not large, but not minuscule either because Assad had lived up to the withdrawal agreement that had been negotiated by Kissinger. Even the Israelis said that they would trust Assad to carry out any agreement that he signed. The trouble of course was to getting him to sign. We were not at all that sure about Syria, but we thought it might be highly profitable to intensify the dialogue. Assad himself is one of the most fascinating figures in the Middle East. A curious man, who had interrupted one of his own coups because he wasn't quite ready. He was also the man who in 1970 stopped the Syrian Air Force from supporting the Syrian tanks who were at the moment fighting the Jordanians. He was certainly unconventional. For this and other reasons, we wanted to probe to see what the Syrians could live with--whether they could ever come to an agreement with Israel.

As I mentioned earlier, we saw Syria as a potential force for stability in Lebanon. The Syrians had close connections with many of the Palestinians and other forces and had a great deal of influence with the Beirut government which at the time was led by Franjieh--a very close friend of Assad's. As it turned out one point in 1976, we made a three way deal with Israel, Syria and Lebanon allowing Syrian military forces to enter Lebanon without Israeli threat in order to protect the Christians who were in danger of being massacred by the Palestinian. The Syrians marched in, attacked the Palestinians and forced an uneasy cease-fire in the raging civil war.

Q: Was there a perception that the Palestinians might dominate the situation?

DRAPER: Oh, yes. By 1976, it was quite clear that the Palestinians had already set up a state-within-a-state. People had predicted this outcome starting in 1970 because as the Jordanians were kicking Palestinians out of their country, the latter had no other place to go but Lebanon. In Syria, they would have remained under tight Syrian control; in Lebanon, the government had been traditionally weak and the army and police forces were ineffective. So they went to Lebanon and by 1976, the Palestinian dominated the total area south of Beirut to the Israeli border.

Q: Did we view Syria and Iraq as Soviet satellites?

DRAPER: No, not at all. To call either of them satraps of the Soviet Union would have been to overstate the case. They were very dependent on the Soviets for military assistance--their armies were completely sovietized--, but both countries retained considerable freedom of action and were very careful that there be no perception of Soviet domination. They did not want to join the ranks of the Eastern European countries. Both Syria and Iraq were reluctant to sign "Treaties of Friendship and Cooperation" with the Soviets. They dragged their feet for a long time. These treaties were the means through which Moscow got a grip on the affairs of the other country. Both eventually signed the treaties, but that didn't make Iraq and Syria close friends. Quite the contrary! They were intense rivals.

Q: Did we make any attempts to bring these two countries together?

DRAPER: No, they were completely different. In fact, we liked the idea that they were rivals. We never wanted a coalition of Arabs because that would just increase the strength of the forces arrayed against Israel. The Iraqis did not join in the 1973 war and played only a very minor role in 1967. It was just as well that these rivalries existed. Our principal concern with Iraq at the time was the support that was being provided certain Palestinian groups, including some of the most radical. That was always a bone of contention.

What we really wanted then from Iraq was similar to what we want from Iran today: a modicum of dialogue. It is very awkward to have an important country in a strategically important area of the world with huge reserves of oil which is not willing to talk to us. It doesn't mean that we have to love them, but it is important to have some sort of dialogue. The absence of that is very frustrating. We were always fearful of what might happen when Iraq would become a major player in the Middle East. We watching carefully what equipment and material was being sold to it. The Iraqis could almost match what the Syrians were buying, even though this was long before Iraq had embarked on its major procurement program which it did when the war with Iran broke out. The Iraqi Army was sizeable, but not gigantic. The Air Force was puny by comparison with others in the region like the Iranians. The Shah was still in power and he was building up his forces--on paper at least, the Iranians were stronger than the Iraqis and we were content to let it be that way because even then, the Gulf States, including Saudi, were nervous about Iraq and had every right to be.

ROBERT J. WOZNIAK
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Damascus (1977-1979)

Mr. Wozniak was born in Michigan and educated at the University of Chicago, William College and the University of Indiana. After service in the U.S. Navy in WWII, he joined the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1963. His service included several assignments at USIA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. as well postings abroad as Public Affairs Officer (or Deputy) in Athens, Nicosia, Damascus, and Rabat. Mr. Wozniak was interviewed by Raymond Ewing in 2001.

Q: So you went to Damascus in 1977.

WOZNIAK: '77 to '79.

Q: October. You want to talk a little bit about what the nature of the post was. You were the PAO, who was the ambassador?

WOZNIAK: Dick Murphy for the first year I was there, the first half of the tour and then Talcott Seelye after that. [editor: Murphy was ambassador from September 1974 to April 1978; Seelye was ambassador from September 1978 to August 1981]

Q: Both very strong Arabists and very experienced.

WOZNIAK: Both strong Arabists and wonderful guys. I must say that this was my second PAO assignment. There would be a number, a few more. The pattern was set. I was lucky enough, not only that as I indicated good assignments and rapid promotions, but I never worked for anyone that I didn't respect and admire as Ambassador or DCM. I had just the best track record, good luck in that regard. Both Murphy and Seelye were fabulous guys. And so were the DCMs. Bob Pelletreau, who later went on to be assistant secretary and ambassador to Egypt. I am running down, Ray, Let's stop.

Q: Okay, well, we can pick up and finish talking about Syria next time.

We are continuing with the foreign affairs oral history interview with Robert J. Wozniak. It is 13 February 2002. It has been about two months since our last conversation. Bob, I think we were just beginning to talk about your assignment as public affairs officer in Damascus. That was from 1977 to '79. Why don't you start off by talking just a little bit about the general state of relations between the United States and Syria at that point and the context in which you did your work.

WOZNIAK: Okay, well, I succeeded in the PAO role of Kenton Keith who had gone in at the resumption of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Syria in '74. He had the most fun, I think, because those were the years of shuttle diplomacy, and Henry Kissinger and his entourage were in town every other day. Things had slowed down a bit, quite a bit actually, during my two year tenure. The relationship was certainly distant. It was correct, but distant. Doing business with the Syrians was very difficult. We did manage in my time to negotiate what they insisted that we do which was a formalization of our cultural relationship in terms of all of the exchanges and other activities. That probably was I guess the most important thing that happened in my tenure there. The region was relatively quiet. I can't remember, when did the Israelis move into southern Lebanon? I thought that was during my time, but now I can't remember.

Q: They probably did. They went into Beirut in 1982, but they had been in southern Lebanon before that.

WOZNIAK: Southern Lebanon. But other than that, things on the Golan between Israel and Syria were rather quiet except statements. So these were not those exciting quite frankly diplomatic and political times.

Q: The civil war had started in Lebanon.

WOZNIAK: Oh, yes, that was before I got there.

Q: Did it have any impact on you or your work?

WOZNIAK: Not really. It did mean that embassy Beirut wouldn't allow any of us to come in to visit because there would be an additional security burden. So one didn't get to Beirut during my time, although I did once. One could get to Stura in the mountains, and that was a breath of fresh air of course. Lebanon then in dire unhappy times was a freer place than Syria under a repressive government. But my then fiancée, now wife, and I went off on a trip to Cairo to visit friends at the embassy there and do a Nile tour, and were denied the right to fly back to Damascus from Cairo because of the break in diplomatic relations. This was 1978, Camp David time.

Q: You are saying you were denied because you were an American?

WOZNIAK: No, because all of the air traffic between Cairo and other Arab states was curtailed. The only way we could get back to Damascus was to go into Lebanon, and return to Damascus on land. The embassy agreed we could do that.

Q: So you flew into Beirut.

WOZNIAK: Flew to Beirut. Boulos Malik who was a legend in USIA Arab affairs was the PAO there and graciously allowed us to stay for a couple of days and showed us around the war ravaged city of Beirut. It was horrific, and scary, dicey because they were shooting all over the place. But Boulos was quite a character. He would drive us around the city day and night and show us where probably prudence indicated we shouldn't have been doing. I remember one day my wife and I were down at the Saint George looking at the devastation. The hotels across the street on the quay, what do they call that?

Q: The Corniche?

WOZNIAK: The Corniche were all gutted, bedding and furniture hanging out of windows. But lo and behold, the swimming pool at the Saint George, and the bar were open and functioning. And there were all your glamorous Beirutis hanging around with gold bracelets and bikinis. We were snapping pictures, and my wife had to go to the ladies room. I continued to photograph while she was gone. A guy who was working on his boat there at the marina walked up to me and while pretending not to be talking to me at all seemed to look off in the distance. He said, "Put the camera away, fellow. The last time someone was out here taking photographs, he disappeared and no one knows where he is."

Q: Let that be a gentle warning.

WOZNIAK: As long as the lady is here, you are taking pictures of her and so on, it is okay but otherwise don't do it. That is the only time we got into Lebanon, or into Beirut in any case. As I say for the rest of it, it was a pretty routine tour actually in Damascus.

Q: The overall sort of finality and the tension to some extent, did all that have an impact on the cultural situation in Syria, made it really hard for you to do very much in terms of outreach?

WOZNIAK: It certainly didn't help. I think the Syrians would have officially formally kept us at arms length in any case because of their presumption that we were not even handed in the Israeli-Syrian context. Certainly the events in Lebanon would have exacerbated those kinds of feelings, but they would have been there in any case.

Q: You didn't travel into Israel?

WOZNIAK: No.

Q: I assume you didn't, you made an effort not to show great interest in what was happening in Israel.

WOZNIAK: No, I wouldn't say that. No we gave kudos to Israel during my tenure there. I did visit on other occasions from Cyprus and other incarnations but not very much during the Syria days.

Q: The Soviets certainly played an important role in Syria during much of this period you were there. Did you have a sense that you were competing with the Soviet embassy or with your Soviet counterpart?

WOZNIAK: The Soviets had a massive cultural center in Damascus. They had very tight relations with the Syrians in those days. The putative cultural attaché, head of the center, a fellow named Vladimir, I can't remember his last name, one of the smoothest operators I have ever met in my life. His English was flawless, and his French. I believe he spoke Arabic. My Arabic was rudimentary. Vladimir cultivated me intensely. I think he thought he could turn me because I was a bachelor until meeting my wife who was from Syria. Syria like many other Arab countries was not the most hospitable place for bachelors, foreign bachelors for sure. I think he thought here is a guy I might be able to work on. I got to know him reasonably well as a result. He would call on me, and we ran into each other of course on the cocktail circuit. You know I am of Polish ancestry. I learned how to drink vodka and beer at my grandfather's knee. I remember one New Year's Eve at the home of the British DCM, a guy named John Bunny who was a rock of a man. A Scotsman. He was in his kilts that New Years Eve. He was built like a tree. John and Vladimir and I were the last ones at the party at the punch bowl, well after midnight. Vladimir I think was hoping to see me drunk before he did. But he finally left and John Bunny took him to the door. He came back and said, "You won." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Vladimir is out lying on the lawn." Quite a character.

Q: Did the United States have an information center, a cultural center?

WOZNIAK: We had a small library and adjacent room that was used for film screenings and lectures and exhibits. It was small, modest, but very tastefully done, and popular I should say with young Syrians. It was Kenton Keith's creation. If he wasn't, he should have been proud of it.

Q: Were most of USIS efforts in Syria at that time concentrated on Damascus, or were you doing some things outside of the capital?

WOZNIAK: Almost exclusively in Damascus. No, we didn't have any program activity other than outreach to the visitor program and scholarship activities outside of Damascus. It was essentially capital city oriented.

Q: Did you travel to Aleppo?

WOZNIAK: Yes, but only really mostly for private tourist purposes.

Q: You mentioned the international visitor's program. Were you thoroughly able to select promising candidates on your own or did you have to clear it through the government?

WOZNIAK: Everything had to be cleared through the government. It was very difficult for my job. The Syrians kept tight control on all of our activities.

Q: Your ambassadors were very experienced Arabists.

WOZNIAK: Super guys. Murphy used to on occasion take me along when he had midnight chats with the minister of information, Esconder. A very smooth guy. The entire conversation would be in Arabic, and I had great difficulty following it, but he was gracious and kind to take me along.

Q: Did you pay any attention to Cyprus in this period? You had been there before. Cyprus really wasn't very far away. Cyprus was going through a difficult period still.

WOZNIAK: Only because of my personal interest. It didn't impinge on our affairs in Syria. Sure I followed things as close as I could.

Q: One of the things I think we overlooked when we were talking about your assignment in Nicosia, and maybe this is the point to come back to it just for a minute is the relations between USIS and AKEL, the Communist Party of Cyprus. Were you paying much attention to AKEL at all when you were there, or was that sort of off limits?

WOZNIAK: I had virtually no contact with AKEL. I can't recall I ever met any of its principals.

Q: How about its newspaper?

WOZNIAK: It was not accessible to us for any kind of meaningful purpose, no.

Q: Okay, anything else about your assignment in Damascus that we can cover?

WOZNIAK: Not really Ray. As I told you it was largely a very routine, not easy, but a not very flashy period for USIS work. The best thing that happened to me there, of course, was meeting my lovely wife.

Q: But in terms of feeling any sense of accomplishment in your work or a challenge you could overcome it was pretty frustrating.

WOZNIAK: I can't see that I left or even today have any feeling that we made any contribution to American-Syrian relations. On personal levels yes, the Syrians are lovely people, and the Damascenes are cosmopolitan and industrious and smothered of course by a heavy handed government. But in terms of bilateral relations I don't think we made a bit of difference.

Q: Were Syrian contacts reluctant to meet with you, reluctant to come to your home, had to clear it with somebody?

WOZNIAK: Not really. I am sure that some had to had a government imprimatur to visit foreign homes, but that wasn't a problem. They could come and see us if they wanted and were invited.

DAVID G. NEWTON
Deputy Chief of Mission
Damascus (1978-1981)

Ambassador Newton was raised in Massachusetts and educated at Harvard University and the University of Michigan. An Arabic speaking Middle East Specialist, he served both in Washington and abroad in positions dealing with Middle Eastern matters. His overseas postings include Yemen (three times), Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq. From 1984 to 1988 he served as US Ambassador to Iraq and from 1994 to 1997 as US Ambassador to Yemen. A graduate of the National War College, he was also assigned there as Deputy International Affairs Advisor, and in 1997 he was Special Envoy to Iraq. Following retirement, Ambassador Newton joined Radio Free Europe in Prague. Ambassador Newton was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.

Q: '78 and where, what happened then?

NEWTON: Well, funny, in December I was the first person to get, foreign service person to get told where I would be assigned. I was going as DCM to Damascus. I was really happy. that was a really good job. I was an 01 by that point. Then, but then I had to wait because I was, it was a stretch assignment, which wasn't so unusual in those days. But personnel had someone at grade, there was someone who had a medical issue and so forth. The ambassador, it was Dick Murphy

who wanted me for and, but it, the whole process took ninety days and finally I remember Tom Caroline calling me up on Friday saying, "Congratulations, you've been paneled." So I was really feeling good over the weekend. Monday morning, I got a message to call him. I called him up. He said you can't tell anyone, but Dick Murphy is leaving. He's going to the Philippines and Talcott Seelye is going to be the new ambassador. So I had to start all over again. I had to meet Talcott and get his approval and so forth. The result is it wasn't until May that I got my orders, and by that time I was getting really nervous because if anything had happened of course, all the good jobs would've been picked over long before then. But in any case he agreed. So I went off I think in July, I went to Damascus.

Q: Were you in Damascus from when to when?

NEWTON: From July, okay that's July '78 to July '81. I replaced Bob Pelletreau. And I arrived just two or three weeks before Camp David, which of course changed our whole relationship. So our AID program, I remember, was 120 million dollars a year. It went from 90 to 60 to 45 to 30 to nothing and after I left they began taking money back that wasn't—

Q: What did Camp-- Well, what, when you went out there, what was, let's first take Syria per se. What sort of government, how were things running at that time?

NEWTON: Well, the Baath Assad was by that time firmly in charge. He'd gotten through the '73 war. Gotten through the Lebanon civil war. The Baath was, there was no, at least when I arrived, there was no real opposition. Later in my tour the Brotherhood started—

Q: You hadn't done what the number on that city? What was that?

NEWTON: In Hamāh where they had, but first in Hims they had gone into the artillery officer's cadet school and sprayed it with fire and killed several dozen cadets, and then things really started in Aleppo as well. But at the time I came it was pretty quiet. Talcott came shortly after that, and then we had Camp David, and Assad said, I'm really sorry that happened. I wanted good relations, but this is really going to harm relations." Talcott said, "Well, I hope it won't." Assad said, "Well I wish it wouldn't, but it will." We had a couple of bombs went off in front of the embassy. I mean they were basically harmless, powder charges. But then relations got pretty frigid.

Q: Well, what, why did Assad take the attitude of Camp David, which is essentially a settling of the Egyptian-Israeli situation?

NEWTON: Well, except it settled the Egyptian-Israeli situation at the expense of the Syrians and the Palestinians. I mean there was some language in Camp David, but it was just language about Palestinian rights. But basically it took the Egyptian military out of the equation so that war was no longer an issue. It left the Syrians and Palestinians high and dry.

Q: Well, is there any thought that Assad might say okay, I'd better get in on this thing and do something or not?

NEWTON: Well, I don't think there were any active interests on either side at that point. The Syrians obviously felt at that point they'd be in a very weak position. Their fear was they were, they were afraid that the Palestinians would jump, and the Palestinians were afraid the Jordanians would jump and that the Israelis would pick them off one at the time. In fact the Israelis later did pick off the Jordanians. Assad was trying to keep--. He had bad relations with Arafat, and he was supporting other extremist Palestinian organizations. So there really wasn't much scope for U.S. diplomacy.

Q: What were the Syrians doing in Lebanon while you were there?

NEWTON: The Syrians of course had gone in because of the civil war, and we couldn't really object because they were going in to save the Christians from the Palestinians. But there was, there was a certain amount of bombing on both sides, and the Israelis would get the short end of the air campaigns. Trying to remember, I frankly don't remember so much as I've been involved in other things in Lebanon, and I can't kind of pick out that period anymore. But there's a, the Syrians were getting the short end of it whenever they tried to control Israeli bombing of PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) controlled areas to the south, they would regularly get shot down.

Q: What were you, what sort of embassy did we have and what were you doing?

NEWTON: Well, I was the DCM. One specific job I had which I enjoyed, I was a liaison to a Syrian Jewish community. So I kind of quietly kept track of what was happening to them and trying to help them when they get in trouble, and many of them were trying to flee a little by little usually to get out through Turkey. Of course there was a great deal of congressional interest in this—

Q: Were you getting involved with Steven Solarz trying to—

NEWTON: Oh yeah.

Q: (_____)

NEWTON: Maidens, that's right.

Q: There was this group that was trying to get Jewish young women to come to the United States.

NEWTON: Yeah, a lot of young men were escaping so there were no husbands for these women. So they had sort of fake proxy marriages, but of course it had no validity when it got to the States. They never married these men. But the Syrians went along with it. They figured it was a gesture to the U.S. But yeah, we were kind of keep track of that. I would be in touch with the head of the community also with the one person who was trying to keep us informed was the head of the Copper and Workers' Guild, which was a Jewish guild and also with the chief rabbi. We would get periodic visitors. I remember Senator Ribicoff coming. It was amusing because the head of the community was this little old man, Mr. Tuta, Mr. Mulberry, and he lived in this

run down house in the old city which only one or two rooms was habitable. But he would bring the council together. Ribí, no it wasn't Ribicoff, I'm sorry. It was Steve Solarz I think. In any case Solarz was being Solarz, and they were offering him food and drink, and he was in a hurry, and he was refusing their food and drink which in the Middle East is insulting. Tuta to show he was educated kept trying to talk French. Everybody else was talking Arabic. I'm trying to interpret for all these people, and they're all talking at once. I wasn't able to get it all. But in any case at one point he refuses, and Tuta calls across the room and says, "Mr. Solarz you can't keep refusing our food and drink. You're among Arabs." I thought I wouldn't translate that for him because of course they would say we're Jewish Arabs. Yeah. But I thought, that's one I'll pass. I won't interpret.

Q: Did was at that point was everything static on the Golan Heights?

NEWTON: Yes, yeah it was. It was—

Q: It still is.

NEWTON: It still is. Yeah. Yeah. There's nothing really going on. It was, I enjoyed the tour. I enjoyed Syria, but it was not a good time to be there. Our AID program was going downhill.

Q: How, I mean you were there during '79 when all hell broke loose in Iran. How did that, did that have any reflection in our embassy was taken over by—

NEWTON: Yeah.

Q: (_____)

NEWTON: Yeah it did. I think Assad was appalled by this privately, but the Syrians were supporting the new Iranian government. We would have regular demonstrations by the Iranians because further up the hill was the Iranian embassy, and they were having all kinds of elections for various things, and there are a lot of Iranians in town. There's an Iranian shrine Sayidda Zeinab, a big shrine in Damascus. So they would come march down the street. I was talking to someone yesterday. It was amusing because we were right across the street from the Iraqi embassy, and there was a rapprochement at one point between the Syrians and the Iraqis, but that had broken down. But then the war had, of course, had happened. When the Iranians came down marching down the street, we never knew whether they would turn left and demonstrate against us or turn right and demonstrate against the Iraqi embassy. Yeah, there was a lot of Iranians around town and so forth, had pictures of Khomeini everywhere.

Q: Well, what about terrorist groups, Abu Nidal and others. I mean was Syria at that time hosting the terrorists?

NEWTON: It was hosting some extremists. The main one was the popular front for the liberation of Palestine slash or dash general command, which was pretty radical and other smaller radical groups. But I think trying to remember at that point, I don't think at that point we had incidents of terrorism traced back to Syria. We did have one unpleasant event when a Pakistan airliner

hijack showed up in Damascus and sat there for a whole week. I spent the week at the airport, and they were threatening to execute the few Americans on board. They were supposedly three Americans on board, two of whom were drug dealers because they had been on an internal pack flight. Plus a Canadian drug dealer. One of the Americans turned out not to be an American. He was, he had a fake passport. The other one was under sealed indictment, and his father came out and gave us a really hard time. His father was a lawyer, and he was probably involved in the drug trade too. Anyway, we arranged to have him, with the Syrians, to have him escorted on a flight to Frankfurt, and when he got off, two DEA agents grabbed him and took him. But the other one was a, the son of a friend of then Vice President Bush, and he'd been trekking in the Himalayas, and we were very anxious about him particularly, and we finally got him out. The Syrians being the Syrians, when they finally came, I was there when they came off the plane. It was like, what was it Pigpen in Charlie Brown. There was this huge cloud, imagine this huge cloud of dirty air. These people had been on the plane for a week. Actually two weeks I think because they were a week in Pakistan. These Syrians then grabbed them all up and took them, simply arrested them and took them off to a military hospital to give them examinations, but shut them up, wouldn't let them communicate with anyone. We had a hard time convincing them this was not the smart thing to do, not to let them communicate.

Other than that, well, I can remember we had a kid I think he was a son of an editor of Time or Newsweek or a senior editor of some magazine. Anyway he was in Jordan and he didn't, couldn't get a, didn't have a Syrian visa, and so he decided the hell with that. I want to go to Syria. So he went to some remote spot and walked across the border. Then as he came to the hotel he realized he'd been in Israel and had Israeli stamps in his passport, and he thought that's probably not a good idea. So he tore the page out of the passport and checked into the hotel, gave them the passport. Of course he was arrested within about thirty minutes and had a very hard time getting him out. We had a, I had a contact who was I think the head of the court of appeals and through him managed to get him out. He immediately hit me for a bad visa case, which I had to give him in return. But to get this kid out. No, it was professionally it was not a lot of fun because it was all going downhill. But I enjoyed the country and it was—

Q: How about life with you and your wife and you had, how old were your kids then?

NEWTON: Yeah, our kids were in the local school. I was also my other job, I was the head of the school board, which I enjoyed. I used to tell the ambassador, you may be number one in the embassy, but I'm number one in the schools so keep your mitts off the schools, which he did. His successor did not. I mean this was joking of course. But we built up the school, and I got a lot of satisfaction out of the school. It was nine grades, up to nine grades. It was a nice little school. But and we had a lot of social life. Syrians are very nice people. I could travel a lot, and it was all very interesting, but there was nothing in my professional side that I could look at that was advancing and getting better. Our relations were going south.

Q: Well, how did the, had the Iran-Iraq war started by the time you'd left or not?

NEWTON: Yeah, I left in the summer of '81. Yeah, it had started in September 1980.

Q: How was that going? I mean how was that seen as—

NEWTON: Well, in the first year it was going pretty well for the Iraqis, and their relations were very hostile between Iraq and Syria because Syria was supporting Iran. I remember at some point the chargé going outside Damascus to some exercise. The kind of regime they had all the college students and everything enrolled and youth programs and military training, and so they put on an exercise, and it was really kind of revealing the exercise. It was narrated by Rifaat Assad, the president's brother. The scenario was that Israel had treacherously attacked. Syria was defending itself and was managing to hold off and even push back the Israelis. Meanwhile perfidious Iraqis were taking the opportunity to attack Syria from the east, and they were dropping these student battalions in a blocking position, and they actually dropped some of them out of an aircraft and everything. It was kind of silly anyway. But I was a little bit taken aback by this, by this scenario of (____) one Arab country attacking another.

Q: What about, Assad was fully in control, but I always think of the bazaar in Damascus that has been going for time immemorial. Was there a strong merchant element there?

NEWTON: Yeah, there was traditionally a strong merchant class in Damascus. They were suffering because of the stagnation, economic stagnation. Of course what happened, the regime became more and more corrupt and Assad was really not trying very hard anymore. Basically what happened all these merchant families, they would cook up some senior person in the Baathi-Alawi regime had an angel who would give them the political influence, and then they'd share the profits. So it was, and that's still the case.

Q: Did you see, I mean looking at this. I always thought that Syria had the potential to be a minor but still sustainable economic power in the area because it has, doesn't it have oil?

NEWTON: Yeah, it has—

Q: Natural gas and all that

NEWTON: It has oil. The oil is beginning to decline, but it doesn't have to spend money importing oil. Basically it used the, used the oil, exported and imported others in its place. Others went into the refinery. It has a good agricultural sector. Socialism harmed it, and it has a very expert merchant class so it could be much more prosperous than it has been.

Q: Well, did you see the Assad regime running this for the good of their tribe, the Alawis?

NEWTON: The Alawis, yeah.

Q: I mean was this kind of the name of the game?

NEWTON: It was for the benefit of some of the Alawis, and there were a number of Sunnis in mixed in with it. But the Alawis have complained that they haven't really benefited as much, maybe more in those days. The Alawis, the Sunnis who considered the Alawis uncultured, uneducated resented their behavior. But the Assad, it was, Assad had brought stability to the country at least.

Q: Well, did you, what was the role, what was happening with the Muslim Brotherhood at this point?

NEWTON: Well, the Brotherhood was building up in secret, and it came out in the open when it killed all these cadets in Aleppo.

Q: Was that during your time?

NEWTON: Yeah and then there was a number of terrorist incidents, hand grenades thrown in stores and other places in Damascus, and they even killed a Soviet colonel in the (____). Then the troubles really started in Hamāh. When they rose up in Hamāh, they massacred the Baathi official security police, army. So the government certainly was facing a direct challenge to their regime. Assad held off for quite a while because he knew this would have a great affect on this popularity and, but in the end he was convinced by his security people that they couldn't, they had to do something. Then the security people went in with a lot of violence and brutality and did a lot of destruction as well in the old city of Hamāh and put it down violently.

Q: Did—

NEWTON: Part of this had become because the security people were keeping such a tight rein on Hamāh, which was known to be a stronghold of the Brotherhood. For example they would break into people's houses at night, which meant that these Muslims had to, their women had to sleep fully dressed. That kind of thing really angers people.

Q: Were we, how did we view the Brotherhood? I mean, the worse of the two evils or where did we feel they were coming from?

NEWTON: Well, they were pretty extreme. I think basically we were not taking sides. We were just observers. We didn't really have a dog in that fight. We were basically observing the regime. It was quite clear the regime really wanted to, it could put it down. In the end it did. It was also a good bit of killing up in Aleppo where they moved an entire armored division to surround the city and then went in with the Alawi security forces.

Q: Did we, were we sort, I take it we were kept pretty far away from all of that sort of action.

NEWTON: Yeah, I mean the city of Aleppo was sealed off. I remember I had been out on a trip to the desert, and I just came to the main road, and there was just an endless stream. It was the division trains of this armored division moving up to Aleppo for an hour, just one truck after the other. Yeah, no Assad finally was convinced he had to put it down. Once he let the security people loose, they were really, they really acted with a lot of brutality.

Q: How did we find, could you get out and around or did you feel yourself—

NEWTON: No, you could get out and around. I always liked to travel and well, I traveled all over the country. The only, you had to have permission to go down on the Golan, but you could

easily get permission to go to Qunaytirah, the martyred city because when the Israelis pulled out as part of the Golan agreement they just destroyed the town deliberately, just smashed all the buildings.

Q: It was sort of kept as a monument, wasn't it.

NEWTON: Yeah, and the Syrians didn't rebuild it. They kept it as a kind of outdoor museum to point out all the evils of the Israelis.

Q: What about dealing with the Syrian foreign ministry and all? How did you find that?

NEWTON: They were pretty good. The direct, we had a lot of contact with the director of American affairs and the director of Western European affairs. Inaudible was the foreign minister at the time. He was not an easy person to deal with. Not a particularly good ministry, but we could do our business. It wasn't a problem.

Q: Were there attempts as part of well, the American government specifically the State Department to see, is there any, we can work with Assad or were we just sort of let's take their course?

NEWTON: Now we were willing to work with the Syrians to the degree anything could be done. I mean they were obviously a major factor in Lebanon. But they were difficult to deal with. I mean there was a, at one point they were threatening King Hussein. They moved a couple of army division down there. If you remember during Black September, they had tried to do something, but the Assad at the time, the head of the Air Force had withheld the Air Force, which made a big difference. But we didn't have a lot in common to--. Where we could, we tried to cooperate with them, but there wasn't a whole lot to do.

Q: Were we carrying any messages from the Israelis as a go between there at all?

NEWTON: Yeah, we did. Phil Habib was there. They were trying to solve problems in Lebanon and Middle East, and yeah, we were, and Habib was because of the civil war in Lebanon was shuttling back and forth going to Israel and going to Damascus and Beirut, and you remember the Israeli invasion took place at the time.

Q: Yeah, how did that, there was quite a fight with the Syrians at that point.

NEWTON: Yeah, the Syrians, they tried to defend themselves. They got bloodied a bit. Their real concern obviously and always strategically was that if the Syrians, if the Israelis had a free range to come up Bekaa Valley, they could then go through the back door into Damascus and bypass all the Golan defenses. So they were not about to give way on that, and they held on although they took something of a beating.

Q: They took a beating, but my recollection is that the Israelis got a bloody nose too. I mean it was not—

NEWTON: Yeah, the Syrians fought--.

Q: It was no longer a—

NEWTON: The Syrians got the short end of it, but they fought and fought pretty well because this was critical for them. But the main interest was going in after the Palestinians and—

Q: How did, what were we gathering about the Palestinians. The Palestinians weren't a particularly a beloved group in the Arab world. What about the Syrians? I mean were they a useful tool or what?

NEWTON: Useful tool to whom?

Q: Syria, the Palestinians, the PLO.

NEWTON: No, relations were not good between the Syrians and the PLO because the Syrians distrusted the PLO and thought they might make some kind of deal and leave the Syrians out in the cold. They didn't like Arafat. They considered him unreliable and so forth. But they couldn't, when the Palestinians were taking it on the chin from the Israelis, they couldn't, they didn't help them that much, but they couldn't really oppose them.

Q: Well, was there sort of a, I mean obviously the Israelis were not beloved in Syria, but was there a real revulsion. There were massacres in the Palestinian camps and all?

NEWTON: Yeah, this of course yeah, among Arabs certainly and well, I mean they were pretty upset about it. The Israelis were, the Israelis provided all the lighting and everything so the Christian militia could operate at night killing people. I and if you looked out, I could see much of it on television, and I remember seeing we recently had this dispute about white phosphorus. The Israelis used white phosphorus against the Palestinians in West Beirut, and I remember that AUB (American University of Beirut) said they had the bodies of young children in their morgue, and they smoldered for several days because of the white phosphorus. Quite a few, and there were reports of people jumping into the sea and everything, but of course did not good with white phosphorus. It was pretty horrible against civilians.

TALCOTT W. SEELYE

Ambassador

Syria (1978-1981)

Ambassador Talcott W. Seelye born in Lebanon to American parents on March 22, 1922 and lived there until the age of 11. He joined the U.S. Army during World War II. He received a bachelor's degree from Amherst College in 1947 and joined the Foreign Service in 1948. Ambassador Seelye's career included positions in Frankfurt, Germany; Amman, Jordan; Beirut, Lebanon; Kuwait, Kuwait; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and an ambassadorship to Tunisia. He was

interviewed in 1995 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: What about Syria? Syria always seems to be the odd man out in the Middle East from our policy point of view. Here it is, it has a lot of potential but doesn't seem to be able to have the impact as some of the others do, Egypt or Iraq. Impact on U.S. and also in the area. What were our interests in Syria and how do we view Syria?

SEELYE: At that time, of course, we had no diplomatic relations with Syria. Our main operational concerns were our Interests Section in Damascus. Maintaining it and making sure money got to the Italians who had taken it over.

Q: Did we have officers there?

SEELYE: No, no. No officers.

Q: It wasn't like we did in Cairo?

SEELYE: No, neither Iraqi nor Syrian Interest Sections had any officers.

At that point (Assad took over in 1970) Syria was considered a radical regime. Until Assad took over Syria hadn't played much of a role or attempted to play much of a role in regional political dynamics.

As regard to Lebanon, Syria's presence was nowhere near what it has been since then, since 1976. Syria always felt that Lebanon was geographically part of Syria. Relations were reasonably good, but Lebanese governments who made decisions in those days did not have to defer to Syria as they do now. So Syria's role in Lebanon was modest until 1976. There were a lot of Syrian workers working there. I don't recall during this period, even when there were crises in Lebanon, Syria had much of a role to play.

Q: How did we at that time view the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East?

SEELYE: Well, of course, old hands, like me, always took a jaundiced view of the propensity of Washington, even before Kissinger came along, to view Middle East problems in cold war terms. And of course Kissinger developed that to an nth degree. Before he came along we had the Baghdad Pact which was an effort to build up a buffer against Soviet influence. Instead it helped to inspire nationalists like Nasser to come along. Then we had the Middle East Defense Organization, which involved handing out money to Arab governments to build up their so-called anti-communist military defenses. None of us, or very few of us, really believed in this sort of thing.

Then, of course, in the late fifties, countries like Syria began to move more into the Soviet orbit as a reaction to our strong support to Israel and because of actions Israel was taking. Our refusal to help Syria, ourselves, militarily turned them to the Soviets for military aid. It was as simple as that. There was a radical regime in Syria before the Ba'ath took over. But when the Ba'ath took over there was a propensity in some parts of Washington to say that Syria was pro-Soviet. The

Middle East hands knew that the Ba'athists were anti-communist, anti-Marxist. I never believed that a Ba'ath regime was going to hand over Syria to the Soviets. And, of course, they didn't. When Assad came in he kept the Soviets at arms length. So anybody who understood Syria in those days knew that the Soviets had very minimal influence in Syria. They provided military assistance, yes. And in that sense some people were concerned because on paper the large quantity of Syrian arms made Syria look as if it was a match for the Israeli army. But anybody who knew the Syrian army as I did, knew that was a lot of malarkey.

Q: How did you know the Syrian army?

SEELYE: All you had to do was to drive between Jordan, Syria and Lebanon in the early fifties and see what a crummy bunch the Syrian military were. We could also tell that the quality of leadership was limited and they weren't very good at maintaining their equipment, etc. So the Syrian military threat was always a myth in the view of people like me, at least. And, of course, when Kissinger came along he tried to propagate this view.

Q: You have the 1967 war which knocks out a number of places where Foreign Service officers can go which is Iraq, Syria and to some extent Egypt. Did you see a decrease in recruiting new people for the Middle East? As an old Arabist, did you feel it a duty to try to bring new blood into the field? (end first section)

SEELYE: I don't recall that we were ever called upon to try to bring people into the Service who might specialize in Arab affairs. I sensed, however, that for a period of time fewer Foreign Service officers chose to take Arab studies. That was the case, I think. I think the closing of the posts may have affected the disposition of many Foreign Service officers to make this a specialty. I think that is true. And I sensed a hiatus as time went on with regard to officers with experience in the Middle East.

JOAN SEELYE
Wife of U.S. Ambassador to Syria
Damascus (1978-1981)

Mrs. Seelye was born and raised in Connecticut and educated at Skidmore College. She accompanied her husband, Foreign Service Officer Talcott Seelye on his diplomatic assignments in Germany, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Tunisia and Syria. Her husband served as US Ambassador to Tunisia, Lebanon and Syria. Mrs. Seelye was interviewed by Jewell Fenzi in 2010.

Q: Were there any repercussions?

SEELYE: No, there weren't. But there were later on in Syria. When Talcott met the PLO representative in Syria, Talcott was a very polite person and he shook hands with this person who turned out to be the PLO representative. It was a set-up, and the press was there and they

took pictures, and Talcott was given the devil for that. He didn't know who the man was and was just being polite.

So then, after we were in Washington this time, for about two years, we went to Syria which was our last post. And this is 1978-1981. I said that I didn't think I'd ever love any place the way I'd loved Tunisia. Well, I just adored Damascus. It's a fascinating city; it's the oldest continually inhabited city in the world, and I just loved it. I couldn't do enough exploring. Yes, by myself, but I had a driver, and he would take me where I wanted to go, mostly down to the old city, not so much to buy anything, but because that's where the monuments were, and a great mosque was there, where John the Baptist is buried. The street called Straight is in the old city where Paul was converted to Christianity. It's a Muslim city with a good size Christian community, and also, there's a Jewish community there too but most of them have gone either to the States or to Israel.. We had an AID mission here. I and a couple of women wrote a book called Living in Damascus. Those books are really helpful. The other embassies might have done that, but there was nothing like that for Damascus. So, we wrote that book, which showed you a map of the city, and told you where the best doctors were, their telephone numbers, hospitals, and about life in Damascus. I think that was important.

At that point there were a lot of political problems in Damascus politically. Ba'ath party, the ruling party, was fighting the Muslim Brotherhood. There was a lot of shooting in the streets, and we could hear bullets and guns going off anywhere, but it didn't seem to bother me too much. Again, of course, we had a marine in residence. He had a big room with all kind of fancy equipment and radio. He was always in radio contact with Amman which was peaceful at that point; radio contact with Lebanon at that point wouldn't have done any good because Lebanon was in a state of chaos. One day I went down to the souk on a Friday, and I could hear the shooting going on. The driver was nervous but I told him not to mind the shooting, to wait there as I'm going to go to the left, the shooting was going on to the right. I seem to be almost too casual about that kind of thing. We would have demonstrations going by the residence up to the embassy, and we would pull down all of these blinds. I would worry about the help. The marine would always put me upstairs behind iron bars; when we went upstairs the iron bars were closed so we were safely locked up.. But what was going to happen to the staff? I always worried about that. But no mob during my time there broke in, but three or four years later people broke into the residence and the burned most of the downstairs. The marines saved the ambassador's wife. One day the gunnery called me up asking to see me saying, "We have new equipment we'd like to show you." So, he came over to see me, and he said, "Let's go upstairs to the balcony ". The balcony overlooked a beautiful garden. He said, "I've got this very special thing to show you. It's a ladder with which you'll be able to leave this balcony and escape into the garden." Around the whole area, these very old trees had been planted that produced some kind of a big grapefruit, but with a lot of spikes on them. I would have been killed by the spikes if I had tried to climb down that ladder. And not only that, we were on an incline on a hill, so once I got down into the garden, I'd have to jump over the wall to a twenty foot drop below--I'd kill myself. So, I told him that, and he said, "Well, Mrs. Seelye, we'd rather have you stay where you are anyway." And he left. I mean, there was no way I could have gotten out of that house safely.

I had a lot of visitors here too. We had a lot of shuttle diplomacy between Tel Aviv and Damascus with the Arab-Israeli problem, but I won't dwell on that. It never got anywhere, the

way peace talks aren't getting anywhere now; they've been going on for years and they aren't getting anywhere. This morning TV announced the peace talks had ended.—no surprise to me. Just three little words: land for peace will do it.

We had Secretary and Mrs. Vance come to visit, and they were lovely people. No embarrassment there. They were nice people, and it was only overnight, but we did have Harry Byrd and his big staff, his whole Senate office. He came over on one of those presidential planes with his blue hair and his poor, pathetic little wife -- she was really pathetic -- and his secretary whom he was having an affair with. We knew that, and she was an alcoholic to boot. So, the State Department escort officer who liked his drinks too could not have a drink the whole time he was on the plane coming over and going back because the bar was locked because his mistress was a drinker. Anyway, these were weird people. They didn't treat Mrs. Byrd very well. She'd say, "I'd like to go with Mrs. Seelye." And they'd say, "No, you can't go with Mrs. Seelye, you're coming with us." They treated her poorly. She was a very shy, quiet little woman. The reason we know Byrd was sleeping with his secretary is because there were press people who were sleeping in the same hotel downtown and one night, one of the ABC or NBC men watched Harry Byrd leaving his own bedroom, and he followed him down to his mistress' room. So that's how we know. Anyway, we gave a great big dinner for him the next day, and he kept saying to Talcott, "How am I doing? Am I doing all right?" And I kept thinking, "We have this very important senator, and he wants to know if he's doing all right?" I thought that was kind of odd. When we took them to the airport, his wife carried his hair dryer. His hair was very important to him, and she carried the hair blower. I don't know when he expected to use it. It was just lying on the seat between them. He thoughtfully asked us if we would like to come aboard and see what a presidential plane looked like inside. That was nice of him. And there was one big room fitted out like an office which was all very comfortable. I could see them calling it Air Force Two or something.

Another hobby which many foreign service officers take up in that part of the world was digging in ruins of which there are many on the Euphrates, there were great Assyrian ruins that went back thousands of years before Christ, even before history you might say, and many of these digs were run by American archeologists so that was very interesting. Damascus was a fascinating country in spite of the fact that it was unsafe at times. I loved it, as much as much as Tunisia. So, I think I've covered everything so far.

MILES WEDEMAN
Mission Director, USAID
Syria (1978-1981)

Mr. Wedeman was born in Maryland on January 23, 1923. He received his LLB from Harvard University in 1949. He spent three years in the Navy during World War II. During his career with USAID, he spent time in the Finance Bureau for Africa, and served in Seoul and Phnom Penh, as well as in Syria. Mr. Wedeman was interviewed on September 12, 1995 by John Kean.

Q: You might comment first about the situation in the Middle-East at the time that you took up your assignment there and how the US related to Syria during that period.

WEDEMAN: I went to Syria as the Mission Director in July 1978. Diplomatic relations had been broken off between Syria and the United States at the time of the 1967 war. This is when Israel overran the West Bank, until then under Jordanian control, and the Golan Heights in Syria. Diplomatic relations did not exist between 1967 and 19.. - I can't give you the exact year - but it would be about 1973. Renewal of diplomatic relations was part of a package negotiated by the Secretary of State himself, Henry Kissinger. In his shuttle diplomacy, he had extensive negotiations with the Assad, Hafez El Assad, the President of Syria, whom he is said to have respected enormously. The Embassy was reopened - I'm guessing - in about 1974, with the understanding that there would be an American aid program. This was part of the U.S. commitment to peace in the Middle East through cooperation with a very prominent Arab state, which had been quite hostile in the past.

It was not anticipated that the U.S. program would be the largest program in this situation. Rather the U.S. would have a position and a presence, but it would not be the major donor. The major donors by far, although all in cash, were the oil rich gulf states: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. When I was in Syria they were providing somewhere between a billion and a billion and a half dollars a year, deposited in checking accounts of the Syrian Government in Europe. Next came the World Bank with quite a sizable program. The World Bank, I think, had been there all the time, but it may have expanded its program as a result of the working out of these various arrangements between the U.S. with Syria. Our program ran to \$90,000,000 a year, a predetermined number. I had a predecessor in Syria as Mission Director. Gordon Ramsay was the first one to be in Syria as Mission Director after 1967. He had been director of personnel, among other things, in Washington in AID. He started the program, and when I came in '78, I simply inherited what had already been set in motion. It consisted of three pieces: a very large capital projects program which was unusual for AID at that time; a commodity import program; and a small technical assistance program.

A major component of the latter was a training program. The Syrian Government realized that by having had so many people educated at the professional level in either the Soviet Union or other states in the Eastern Bloc, they were not as well qualified technically in many fields as, for example, the Iraqis were, whom they were always looking at and with whom they in general enjoyed terrible relations. They wanted to send some of their experienced technical people to the United States for short term training in order to upgrade their skills. Many did not speak adequate English, and AID started an English language training center in Damascus. Through it went most of the people who were sent on to the United States for training from anywhere a month or two up to a year. The men and women in this program were usually middle level professionals, such as plastics engineers. Typically they were probably 10 to 15 years into their working careers, and all had been educated in the Eastern Bloc. This was a very popular program and very successful, I believe. It confirmed what I always thought, namely that participant training was a great thing to do and didn't cost a great deal of money.

Georgetown University was the contractor providing the instructors.

We had a commodity import program, although it was not a general commodity program in the

usual sense. It was focused on equipment. As a result the U.S. became best known in Syria for financing garbage trucks for Syrian cities, most notably Damascus and Aleppo. Everybody recognized these bright yellow trucks when they went into service. The Government refused to allow the AID clasped hands logo to go on the trucks. If you forced them to put them on the trucks they would immediately take them off.

Nevertheless, everyone in Syria knew where they came from and the Government did not gain much by attempting to conceal their origin.

The last component of the program, the biggest part of it, consisted of capital projects. There was a big project for improving the water system for Damascus and others for the construction of major roads. Before I arrived in Syria much of the preliminary work had been done for a program for building state schools, particularly in northern Syria where the level of education was lower than in the rest of the country. The Government's objective was to have everyone educated through high school by 1990. The school building program was conceived with particular attention to girls, because women inevitably had not received as much education as men over the years. A second project was for small water supplies in selected locations, again in northern Syria. The Government also requested our financing for a rural roads program in the north.

All of these projects were developed by the Syrians. The Syrians, like the Koreans, had a large cadre highly trained, experienced, professional people. American firms were employed in some cases, but generally the experience was not very good. One drawback - I suppose it couldn't be avoided - a number of the people of these firms provided could not speak Arabic, perhaps not a crippling weakness in that many educated Syrians did speak English. The Syrians, interestingly enough, were very hard negotiators even though we were providing the money and had to approve the contracts for engineering and construction. The Syrians were intent on always negotiating for the lowest price. This was not always the wisest thing to do in the case of engineering firms. The result was they got - I won't say bargain basement firms or bargain basement people - but they did not get the best.

A great fear existed on the part of Syrian officials of being accused of corruption, accusations coming mostly from the top. Thus, they were always super careful about what they would agree to. It very often took forever to get anything settled so that by the time the Syrian program began to shut down as a result of congressional pressure, little had been accomplished in getting the big capital projects underway. Some projects should have been started long before but had not, because of endless negotiations between Syrian Government agencies and American firms.

Furthermore, administrative procedures in the Syrian Government were difficult, cumbersome and slow, everyone trying to make sure that nobody could be accused of corruption. I remember one person - a Palestinian who tutored me in Arabic and had been in Syria a long time said, "You know what this place is? It's the Ottoman empire." He as a Palestinian had to have various documents renewed from time to time. He said, "Every time it happens there are all kinds of chops and initials all over the documents. When I see this I know the Ottoman empire is alive and well." He had been born under Ottoman rule.

When it came to the matter, for example, of importing project vehicles you could spend six months to a year in the clearance process for one vehicle and you had to hire facilitators to get the job done. One reason why it was difficult importing vehicles for aid projects was the fact that the Syrian Government had a law or regulation flatly forbidding the import of any new vehicle. This didn't mean that all of the vehicles were old in Damascus or other Syrian cities, far from it. I saw many new Mercedes and a friend of mine said, "You have to pay a bribe to bring these vehicles in despite of the anti-corruption efforts." He said, "You look at a Mercedes and let's say it's a Mercedes 500, just add three zeros and you know how much had to be paid; 500,000 Lira (Syrian pounds)", then worth about 4 to the dollar.

Despite all of these restrictions economic life went on. Syria physically sits right in the middle of a very busy area. It's on the main road, north and south, from Europe to the Gulf. Syrian cities stand in a line along this road, starting with Aleppo with the north and ending up with Damascus in the south. The road was heavily traveled by trucks in Europe transiting Syria on their way to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. This was also true with respect to traffic coming out of Lebanon, even after Lebanon more or less had fallen apart militarily and politically. The Bekaa Valley in central Lebanon lying over the mountains from Beirut, was enormously prosperous. It's a great farming area and there was a huge amount of truck traffic carrying fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the Bekaa to the Gulf. When you went to there from Damascus, in crossing the border, very often you could see maybe 50 or more refrigerated semi-trailers on their way to the Gulf. Years of great prosperity for that area even though Beirut was a mess! In any event, as I say, Syria stood there in the center of traffic.

American relations with the Syrian Government were satisfactory until the negotiations at Camp David in 1978 and then they fell apart. The Syrians felt that they had been ignored. The Secretary of State did come to Damascus shortly after that to try to bring them around but it didn't work. Apparently some American officials felt King of Jordan could assuage Syrian feelings. It simply couldn't be done. Nor can it now.

After Camp David, which was about the time I arrived, relations went downhill. By the time I departed in June of 1981 I couldn't get appointments with Syrian officials. I was not able to pay a courtesy call on the senior Syrian official who was responsible for dealing with us. I simply had to tell his secretary I was leaving the next day. They simply wouldn't receive us. Relations were very, very chilly. By that time it became clear that the U.S. was going to cut back on the aid program, even canceling projects for which project agreements had already been signed, a practice more or less unknown before then. Having said all that I found Syria an interesting place to be.

Q: Did you feel that your role there was connected significantly with the cold war or mainly with the Middle-East struggle?

WEDEMAN: The two things were somewhat linked. Syria at that time was a very close ally of the Soviet Union. I'm not sure the Soviet Union found that very pleasant, because the Syrians were very difficult to deal with. They were difficult with us, they were difficult with the Soviet Union. There certainly were the overtones of the cold war. There were quite a few Russian civilian technicians in Syria and the Syrian military was fully equipped by the Soviet Union.

Everything - tanks, planes, everything - had been provided by the Soviets and this was covered by annual agreements. The relationship was close. However, Syrians were very friendly to Americans and many knew a great deal about the United States. After a while when I met a Syrian for the first time - say middle class or upper middle class -I would say, "Do you have any relatives in the United States?" and in seven cases out of ten they did. Often the relatives were doctors. For example, I gained an impression of a clutch of surgeons of Syrian origin in Santa Barbara, California.

Even in the years when diplomatic relations didn't exist some Syrians still traveled to the United States. I remember I dealt with a man -can't remember what the professional connection was - but he was the Mercedes distributor in Syria, obviously well connected, and I asked him if he had been to the United States. He replied, "Oh yes, I go every six months." He had for many years and he was very proud of the fact that he had bought from a Texan a very long white Cadillac convertible, that had imitation cattle horns on the radiator. He said his most interesting experience during the preceding six months in the United States had been when he was driving from Columbus, Ohio -I think - to Chicago and he was stopped by an Ohio state policeman, who told him he was speeding (Syrians as a whole were very fast, reckless drivers). The Syrian said, "Yes I admit it, I don't have any money on me though." The state policeman then asked, "You have credit cards?" My acquaintance was impressed by the fact that there was no way to avoid paying. Yes, he did have credit cards.

I said from time to time, "The ideal country for an American to be stationed in is one where the government is unpopular, enjoys close relations with the Soviet Union, and is hostile to the United States." Syria met all of these criteria. I only was treated rudely once in Syria when I was accused of being an Israeli spy, but uh...

Q: Weren't you?

WEDEMAN: [Laughs] Yes! I don't know what place - it was in a mill which spun silk from cocoons. Syria did have something of a silk industry. My wife and I and a friend had gone on a trip in west central Syria and had heard about the mill. While we were there a fellow came in. He was a military man. He asked, "What are you doing here?" He spoke English, and I said, "We're just looking." "You're not... I know what you are, you're an Israeli spy. You're not an American," and so on and so forth. But, you know, even when it came to the Israelis Syrians were curious. They knew a great deal about Israel. For example, my driver, a Palestinian who had fled Palestine in 1948, and I were driving in the countryside one day. Listening to the car radio I heard the "Star Spangled Banner" being played. I said, "Mahmoud, where is that coming from?" He answered, "From Radio Jerusalem." I said, "What's the occasion?" The occasion was the ceremony held when the Israelis handed back the Sinai to the Egyptians. The American ambassadors to the two countries were present. I said to Mahmoud, "Do you listen often to Radio Jerusalem?" His answer was, "Well, they tell the truth."

Syria was a very sophisticated, very interesting place. We were at the crossroads of the Middle East. It was always striking, when you drove from Damascus to Amman at night you'd look to the right and see the lights of Israel only a few miles away. It was that close. The distances are incredibly small. It's something like 90 miles from Damascus to Jerusalem by road. I enjoyed

working with the Syrians even if we didn't get anything done.

Q: It's a tough place. Did you have any involvement in the Tigris and the Euphrates development program?

WEDEMAN: There are several aspects of this. First, major political issues swirl around those rivers, particularly the Euphrates in the case of Syria. The Syrians feel aggrieved at Turkish decisions, which I believe have been carried out, to build dams upstream. These affect the flow of the Euphrates in Syria and downstream in Iraq. The Iraqis were always nervous about what the Syrians were doing with the river and relations with both countries generally were poor. With Iraq, for most of the time that I was there, they were non-existent. With Turkey they were frosty with a long history behind them. Most Syrians disliked Turkey because of the Ottoman Empire which had ruled Syria for five centuries. They tended to blame the Turks for things that went wrong such as a cholera epidemic in 1978 in Damascus during the Haj when many Turks were passing through on their way to Mecca.

The main movers in development along the Tigris were the Russians and the World Bank. We were involved tangentially in one or two smallish projects that never came off. We were never able to get to the point of agreeing with the Syrians as to exactly what was to be done.

Second, major problems developed as a result of a mammoth undertaking to build a major multi-purpose dam on the Euphrates east of Aleppo financed, built and equipped by the Soviets for (i) irrigation of a vast area in northern Syria; and (ii) the generation of power, some of which was to be exported to Jordan. The latter purpose was considered one way to assure the economic viability of the dam. I gather, although I can't speak authoritatively, that this has not happened because the dam has been unable to generate enough power even to meet Syrian domestic needs.

Third and more seriously, when I was in Syria the irrigation scheme was in trouble. The Russians planned and were executing this portion of the scheme. I understand they did not do their technical homework. Huge areas had been cleared and leveled for irrigation and major problems ensued, salination particularly. For example, river bottom land that had been cultivated, let's say, for 2,000 years, had to be taken out of cultivation, because of salinity. This was a major problem.

The World Bank was deeply involved in giving technical advice and trying to figure out whether there was any way to reverse this process. Whether they were successful I don't know. We had agreed to provide equipment to help with the maintenance of new irrigation structures. They were poorly designed and major leaks had developed.

It is a shame that overall scheme was not working out. This area in northern Syria had become a bread basket for wheat, and in the late 1940s and 1950s Syria had become a major exporter of wheat. This was the product, not of state intervention, but of private investment. This had come to an end when the government moved massively in the direction of state enterprise. In the 1970s the Syrians were still growing wheat, but they were now a net importer.

The economy was badly managed, curious for a society so commercially and entrepreneurially minded. Alas, the heavy handed Soviet style way of doing things could be seen everywhere. Yet

banking, modern banking started in Syria. I said, "Whatever happened to Syrian bankers?" The answer was, "They all went to Beirut and of course we have very close relations with Lebanon." The Syrians probably even then regarded Lebanon as a kind of dependency. The two countries had the same currency up until, I believe, some time in the 1960s. When you crossed the border into Lebanon and then came back the formalities always seemed much less than what you would encounter anywhere else in Syria. I remember one day coming back from Lebanon in the official car, which had diplomatic plates. A customs official was getting ready to go through the car; open the hood, open the trunk and so on and so forth. When he looked at the license plates he stopped and said "Oh, Safira Amerikyia" (American Embassy in transliterated Arabic), welcome to my country, go ahead." The Lebanese, on the other hand, regarded many Syrians as "farmers" in a pejorative sense.

Q: Long history there.

WEDEMAN: Yes, but a very interesting place to be in terms of living. I can't think of any place in which I was stationed in the Foreign Service that equaled Damascus as a pleasant place to live. It really was a fine place to live. An interesting country. The past is always with you in Syria.

Q: Okay. That about winds it up with respect to Syria.

WEDEMAN: I might say one or two other things. As relations got worse we were quite aware of the fact that there were growing pressures in this country to stop the aid program and it finally was stopped.

The other matter I might just touch on concerns a river basin river project involving Syria which was pushed heavily by AID with strong cooperation from Israel and Jordan. It called for building a dam across the lower part of the Yarmuk River, which empties into the Jordan Valley as it comes down from the escarpment. The dam was to provide water for irrigation in both Israel and Jordan. The Yarmuk was the border between Jordan and Syria at the dam site. Intensive negotiations took place among AID, Israel and Jordan on the project but not a word was said to the Syrians. I did ask the question once, "Well what about Syria?" and the answer was, "The Jordanians will take care of the Syrians in this regard, they will bring them around."

I said, "If they do it, it will be the first time in history." The Syrians said no. They are now well known for their habit of saying no. No ifs, ands or buts, no qualifications and so the project came to a screeching halt. By that time the atmosphere in Washington toward Syria was very cool and AID never took any steps to open a dialogue with Syria. The Syrians knew exactly what was going on and I don't know if they would have cooperated if they had been talked to or not. Nevertheless I felt then and do now it is a failing in dealing with Syria to think you can deal with Syrians through some other device or intermediary. The answer was and is "no." You must negotiate with them directly. I gather on the question of the Golan Heights even now there won't be any compromise, because Assad's position is very simple, "Get out! We'll talk about other things after you have left." But I think that's about enough for Syria.

EDWARD G. ABINGTON
Political Office
Damascus (1979-1982)

Mr. Abington was born in Texas into a US military family and was raised in military posts in the US and abroad. An Arabic language officer and specialist in Near East Affairs, he describes his experience dealing with Israel-Arab hostilities and general regional problems while serving as Political Officer at Embassies Tel Aviv and Damascus. In his postings at the State Department in Washington, he also dealt with Near East matters. Mr. Abington was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2000.

Q: Whither?

ABINGTON: I got on a plane which had a stop in Tripoli, Libya. At that point we didn't have diplomatic relations with Libya. I flew on to Damascus. I was assigned to the embassy in Damascus. I replaced my friend Ed Walker as head of the political section in Damascus and was there from 1979 until 1982.

Q: What was the state of relations in that period between Syria and the United States?

ABINGTON: The Assad regime was a very secretive regime. We opened the embassy in Damascus after the 1974 Israel-Syria disengagement agreement which had been brokered by Henry Kissinger. The Syrian regime was very heavily dependent upon the Soviet Union for economic assistance and especially for military assistance. The Soviets were the principal supplier of military equipment to the Syrians. There was a very large Soviet presence in Syria, Soviet military advisors there. The stated goal of President Assad was to achieve military parity with Israel. The relationship between Israel and Syria continued to be very tense. The Egyptian embassy was around the corner from the American Embassy. Syria had broken relations with Egypt over the Camp David summit and the Egyptian-Israeli agreement. The Egyptian Embassy had been broken into by a Syrian mob. Demonstrations like that in Syria only took place at the instigation of the Syrian government. The Egyptian Embassy was basically ransacked and was pretty much in ruin. That was a clear sign by President Assad that he disapproved of Sadat's policies. There was a lot of tension between the United States and the Syrian government because the U.S. government was trying to promote the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Of course, the majority of the Arab world had broken relations with Egypt, had expelled Egypt from the Arab League. The Arab League had moved from Cairo to Tunis. The United States was not only pushing the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement but the second part of that agreement, which was autonomy for the Palestinians and trying to promote those negotiations, which in fact started and were ongoing. The PLO at the time was headquartered in Beirut in '79 but there was a love-hate relationship between the PLO led by Yasser Arafat and President Assad. Assad felt that Syria was really the center of the Arab world, that it represented Arab nationalist aspirations. He very much tried to control the Palestinian issue in terms of not wanting a separate peace. He made threatening noises towards King Hussein when he thought that Hussein might be edging towards negotiations with Israel. There was a lot of tension between the United States and Syria during this period. The nature of the Syrian regime was such that it was a very secretive regime. We had

relatively limited contacts with political figures in the regime. The ambassador would see Assad from time to time when there were visitors, the Secretary of State or congressional delegations. But in general, the American ambassador did not have access to President Assad for meetings or for appointments to discuss issues. The primary person that the ambassador dealt with was the Syrian Foreign Minister, Abdel Halim Khaddam, who is still a vice president in the Syrian regime even though Assad has died. We had very little official access to Syrian officials and to the Baath Party. They kept us at arm's length and when we did have discussions with them they were fairly pro forma, a very heavy dose of Syrian propaganda. It was quite difficult to figure out what was going on in Syria. Of course, there was the ongoing Lebanon problem. By that point, 1979, Syria had something like 30-35,000 troops in Lebanon. It controlled Beirut. It controlled the Bekaa Valley. In between the Syrian-controlled area and the Lebanese border was the PLO. Of course, there were clashes at the time. There were infiltration attempts by the PLO into Israel. There were exchanges of fire. There were Israeli incursions into southern Lebanon. But there was this understanding between Syria and Israel that even though Israel was going into Lebanon the area where it would operate ground forces would only be between the Lebanese-Israeli border and the Litani River. North of the Litani River were Syrian troops and Israel was careful not to go north of the Litani River and confront Syrian troops with ground operations. Israel was carrying on air raids against Palestinian targets in West Beirut. You had an incredibly unstable situation. And you had a relatively hostile Syrian regime. (end of tape)

You had an internal situation in Syria that was very complicated because the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni organization, was carrying out major attacks of terrorism and assassinations against the Alaoui Baathist regime of Syria. You had a break in relations between Syria and Iraq because of the rivalry between Hafez El-Assad and Saddam Hussein, two different factions of the Baath Party, each saying that they were the legitimate party, not recognizing the other. It was an incredibly complex mix of a lot of different issues and it was very difficult to figure out what was going on in Damascus because of the nature of this regime.

When I got to Damascus, there was the announcement that Syria and Iraq were going to unite. This had been spurred by the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. But within a matter of a couple of months, the whole process of discussing unification between Syria and Iraq broke down into tremendous acrimony which led eventually to a break in diplomatic relations between Syria and Iraq. It was during this period that the Muslim Brotherhood attacks against the Syrian regime started intensifying. There was intelligence and we knew that the Syrian government felt that the Muslim Brotherhood attacks were being assisted by the Iraqis in terms of providing explosives, arms, infiltrating people across the Iraqi-Syrian border. There also was some evidence that Muslim Brotherhood types in Saudi Arabia were sending money and providing guidance to people inside Syria. There was also a very deep-seated Syrian belief that the Jordanian government was allowing Muslim Brotherhood operatives safe haven in Amman and was allowing them to infiltrate across the border. When I first got there in '79 for the next year to year and a half there was a mounting internal crisis over this challenge to the Alaoui regime. This took the form of assassination of Alaoui political and military figures. The Muslim Brotherhood started assassinating Soviet military advisors and carrying out bombing attacks against Soviet military compounds and very brutal bombing attacks against Syrian government facilities as well. I think it's really interesting because these bombing attacks were as brutal as anything that's taken place in the Middle East in the last 20 years yet because of the secretive nature of the

Syrian regime they tried to cover up the attacks. It was very difficult to get accurate information about who had been killed and so forth. In the summer of 1980, a suicide bomber drove a car to Syrian air force headquarters and the Syrian air force not only was a military arm but it was a military intelligence arm that Assad relied on very much. It was one of the predominant military intelligence units. And he was an air force officer himself. This car bomb killed around 50-60 people in the building. I can remember when the bomb went off, I was in the DCM's office and you could see the windows bulge from the concussion of the bomb. Fortunately, we had Mylar on the windows. Otherwise it would have blown the windows out. I remember going to the American school about a block away from air force headquarters. There was this huge explosion. The Syrians sealed the area off, would not let any foreigners in and were busy removing casualties. We heard through various sources that 50-70 people had been killed. Fortunately, the American community school had just been adjourned for summer vacation. There were a number of windows blown out in the school. I remember walking on the school grounds and finding a boot with a foot in it that had been blown a block or so away from the site of this explosion. These bombings were incredibly brutal.

Q: And it's something that hasn't raised much notice in the West.

ABINGTON: There was another bombing in '80 or '81 in downtown Damascus. A big car bomb went off and killed about 200 people. It took place at the height of the lunch hour rush time. Everyone would go home for lunch and take a nap in the afternoon and then resume work in the late afternoon. This very powerful bomb went off in a very busy part of Damascus. It was on a Sunday. It blew up about three or four buses packed with people. I saw the area. It literally took the sides of a couple of apartment buildings off. I don't think we ever knew how many people were killed by that. But we estimated that there were 200-300 deaths. It created a very dangerous and uncertain situation in Syria. It led to increasing tension between Syria and its Arab neighbors.

Q: I would have thought that the United States would be an obvious target since we were such a promoter of this peace. Of course, this was against Syria. It had nothing to do with the peace process.

ABINGTON: It had nothing to do with the peace process, but there were conversations with the Syrian Foreign Minister in which he voiced very strong suspicion that the U.S. was involved in the bombings, that the United States was giving through the CIA assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood. In that part of the world, there is a very deep feeling of the omnipotent power of the CIA and people are very wrapped up in conspiracies. Of course, the CIA had been involved in a lot of stuff in the region. One could understand why the Syrians were suspicious. On one occasion, the ambassador had been summoned by the foreign minister-

Q: Who was the ambassador?

ABINGTON: The first two years I was there, it was Talcott Seelye. Then from '81 to '82 it was Bob Paganelli. Seelye was summoned by Khaddam. I was head of the political section, so I always went along as notetaker and wrote all the cables. Khaddam produced a couple of walkie talkies made by Motorola and said that these walkie talkies had been recovered from the bodies

of a couple of Muslim Brotherhood types and he cited this as proof that the United States was involved in aiding the Muslim Brotherhood. I remember Seelye denying it but said that he would send these walkie talkies back to Washington, the information on them and so forth, and we would try to get to the bottom of it. Of course, the Syrian suspicion was heightened because we had a ban on the export of any kind of sensitive equipment to Syria. I can recall that the Syrians had asked for Motorola walkie talkies that they wanted to use for the Syrian presidential guard. It was a major decision whether or not to approve the export license of these Motorola radios to the Syrians even though it was for presidential security. So, one can understand the suspicion of the Syrians. If they wanted these Motorola radios and we were making such a big deal out of it and at the same time they found these Motorola radios on the bodies of Muslim Brotherhood, they concluded that somehow the United States was involved.

Q: It was probably an off the shelf item.

ABINGTON: I think that's what it turned out to be, an off the shelf item that had been smuggled into Lebanon and used as communication devices for these Brotherhood types.

Q: The Hamas... That's when the real attack came on the Muslim Brotherhood. When did that happen? Could you explain what that was?

ABINGTON: Let me get there first. There was kind of a mounting crisis. In early 1981, there was serious concern after the Reagan administration had taken over that the Syrian government was about to invade Jordan. Relations between Assad and Hussein had deteriorated considerably over the course of the previous year because of a really deep-seated Syrian suspicion that somehow the Hashemite government was aiding the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, I suspected that they were aiding them as well. Jordanian intelligence is very good. There certainly was a pretty fair amount of evidence that senior Muslim Brotherhood people were headquartered in Amman, and I just cannot believe that the Jordanian intelligence didn't know they were there. Now, was Jordanian intelligence turning a blind eye or actively helping them? I don't know. But Assad made some very threatening military moves with armored divisions toward the Jordanian border. I can remember writing a telegram. We had been notified by the Near East Bureau that the Reagan administration was increasingly concerned about what was going on. I remember writing an analysis which we sent in very high precedent to Washington. I was told there was a National Security Council meeting going on and the analysis was that these were threatening moves by Assad to try to put pressure on Hussein because of his belief that the Jordanians were helping the Muslim Brotherhood but that Assad was a very cautious person and knew that if he were to actually make a threatening move against Jordan it would inevitably lead to an Israeli military action. At the time, Begin was the prime minister and Sharon was the defense minister. It was our assessment that Assad was not going to invade Jordan but was merely trying to carry on a war of nerves and threaten the Jordanians. But given his cautiousness he would not actually send troops into Jordan and reminding people that in 1970 it was Assad's predecessor who actually sent tanks across the border that led to the coup that brought Assad to power. This was very important because one of the options being looked at – and being recommended by some of the ideologues in the State Department – was that the U.S. should carry out air strikes against Syria not only to protect Jordan but indirectly to send a message to the Soviets that the United States would not tolerate Soviet surrogates, which Syrian was looked upon as, threatening

America's friends in the region. It was people like Rick Burt and Paul Wolfowitz who were advocating the use of U.S. air strikes against Syria.

Q: This was very early in the Reagan administration when the anti-Soviet/anti-communist force was there, before reality began to dilute it.

ABINGTON: It was before reality started, but it could have been very dangerous. These people were really ideologues. You didn't have a very strong group of people in place at the time. Cap Weinberger was strong. But you had Dick Allen as the national security advisor. He was very weak. You had Al Haig as Secretary of State, who was kind of wacko. You had Rick Burt. You had Paul Wolfowitz. Real hardliners.

Q: Richard Perle was in there, too.

ABINGTON: Richard Perle was at the Defense Department. Today it's kind of hard to imagine that the Reagan administration seriously considered this option but they were looking at it. The cable that I did really helped convince people that it was not as big a crisis as it appeared.

Meanwhile, the Israelis were egging us on. The Israelis were providing us intelligence in their assessment that Syria was seriously considering invading Jordan. But Begin and Sharon had their own agenda. They wanted to whack the Syrians in order to get at the Palestinians. I saw this throughout the period. As I was reading the telegrams from the defense attaches in Tel Aviv and Ambassador Sam Lewis' talks with the Israelis, I felt that the Israelis were giving us a very one-sided, biased assessment of Syria and Syrian intentions and that they had their own agenda very much at work. But you see this frequently. Washington was predisposed to listen to the Israelis. Assad was viewed as hostile to American interests. He certainly had no defenders in Washington at the time, still doesn't. But this lack of understanding of what was really going on and the predilection to credit Israeli assessments much more than was warranted, that was 20 years ago and we still see it today.

Q: What happened after this crisis?

ABINGTON: We had an excellent military attaché who was on the road all the time. He was an Army lieutenant colonel. He was first rate, spoke Arabic very well. He must have worked 80 hours a week. He and his assistant attaché, an enlisted man, were on the road all the time checking out military deployments. He had a fantastic collection of the military flashes that are painted on the rear ends of vehicles so that you know what unit they are. His reporting was terrific in terms of tracking the movement of Syrian military units. He would be up in the middle of the night driving around, darting in and out of convoys. I really felt that the Israelis... His reporting was shared with the Israelis and the Israelis - I saw this on several occasions - would say that they had an informant who alleged that the Syrians were doing a, b, and c. One specific incident had to do with the deployment of SCUD missiles. I know that we in the embassy in Damascus felt that this was a crock - the CIA station chief, the military attaché, myself - because it didn't make sense what the Israelis were alleging in terms of deployment of SCUD missiles. This guy went out in the middle of the night at some danger to himself because Syrians were not friendly and he confirmed that - and he was instructed to do so by Washington, by DIA - the

SCUD missiles had not been deployed. It was our assessment that the Israelis were using these fabricated sources or maybe they were using signal intelligence and getting us to check it out. So, we were sort of playing their game. But after the initial deployment, through his checking out the situation on the ground... In fact, this was before satellite technology really developed to the point where we had real time intelligence from the satellites. The observation of military attaches was very important. This was true in Syria and it was certainly true in Israel. The Israelis were doing things and it was our military attaches who would see what was happening on the ground that gave us the heads up on various things. The Jordanian border calmed down, but these assassinations were still going on. It was during the spring or summer of 1981 that this section of Hamas, the old section of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, really rose up against the government forces in the area. Hafez El-Assad in consultation with the Alaoui military leaders – and the Alaoui were in all the key military positions, the intelligence units, the special forces, a group called the Defense Forces which was headed by Assad's brother and was deployed in the Damascus area to defend the Alaoui regime – they decided that they had had enough of this uprising, of these assassinations. One has to keep in mind that it was very much targeted against Alaouis. There were many Alaoui officials who were assassinated because they were Alaoui. There had been these brutal car bombings. The government decided that it was going to crush the situation once and for all. Assad's brother, Rifaat El-Assad, deployed the Defense Forces equipped with T-72 tanks to Hamas, closed off the area, went in and just leveled this area where the Muslim Brotherhood was holed up. It was a civilian area. Basically, they shelled it and then they brought in bulldozers and just bulldozed the whole thing. No one knows how many people were killed. I know that it's become the common wisdom that 10,000 were killed. In fact, I don't think anyone really knows. But the Syrians sealed off the area. No one could get in or out for about a week until it was over. That really broke the back of the Muslim Brotherhood. There were assassinations, a few bombings, after that. In fact, once when I was going from where the embassy was to a meeting with some Australian colleagues in an area west of Beirut in a suburb called Mezzay, a bomb blew up about 50 yards from my car. It was incredibly frightening because it was a bomb on one of these three-wheel Suzuki vans. The Syrian security people immediately came out and started stopping cars. There was a car in front of me, a white Peugeot. There were three people in it. They panicked and they just were yelled at by the security people to stop. They kept going. This must have been 10-15 yards from me. The security people just opened up with AK-47s and killed all three people in the car. And they turned around and started pointing their guns at me. I was in a little Volkswagen Rabbit and stopped, held my hands in the air, and kept shouting in Arabic that I was a diplomat. They came over and looked at me and told me to get out of there. I haven't been frightened that much many times. You could see how this terrorism really had the regime on edge.

Q: Were you there when the Israelis invaded Lebanon?

ABINGTON: Yes.

Q: How did that go over?

ABINGTON: We could see the buildup. As we read the reporting from the embassy in Tel Aviv and what was in the Israeli press, particularly people like a very famous Israeli military analyst named Zeb Ship, who's been writing for 25 years, his analyses, obviously based on

conversations with Sharon and the IDF, you could see the Israeli invasion coming. You could see that the Israelis were looking for an excuse to invade Lebanon and to take out the PLO. During the fall of '81 through the winter, you could see a steadily mounting pressure with more and more belligerent noises being made by Begin and particularly Sharon. It was very clear that Sharon was pushing the limits of the red lines. These informal understandings that the U.S. had helped negotiate, these understandings of what each side could and could not do. One red line was that the Israelis would not carry out air strikes against Syrian forces. The Israeli air force carried out attacks in late '81/early '82, hit targets in the Bekaa, and killed Syrian troops. This was viewed by the Syrians as the Israelis breaking one of the understandings that the United States had negotiated. I remember the Syrians came to us and said, "What are you going to do about this? You helped broker this. This is what the Israelis have done, violating the understanding." Of course, as usual when something like this happened, we sat on our hands and didn't do anything because the Israelis, particularly with someone like Sharon as defense minister, basically blew us off. This was a time when there was an increasingly acrimonious relationship between Sam Lewis and Sharon and to a degree Menachem Begin. Whenever he would go in and discuss things particularly on instructions to raise U.S. concerns, he would get reamed out by Begin or Sharon and on occasion they would go out and just publicly berate the United States for questioning Israeli motivation with Sam Lewis standing beside him. But the embassies in Tel Aviv and Damascus frankly got into a very acrimonious relationship in terms of our competing analyses of Israeli intentions. We both became very shrill in what we were saying to Washington, not very professional. We saw the worst in Israeli motives and we basically were right. The embassy in Tel Aviv was trying to defend what the Israelis were doing. We thought in Damascus they were looking the other way and not realizing that the Israelis were setting up a situation so they could invade Lebanon. But when the Israelis violated this understanding, the Syrian reaction, Assad's reaction, was to move SA-3 and SA-6 missiles into the Bekaa Valley in order to defend troops there. His rationale was, "If the Israelis do not abide by the understandings and the Americans don't do anything to reassure us that this won't happen again, we therefore have to take these steps to defend our troops in the Bekaa." That led to a crisis once the Syrians moved those missiles in. That upset the status quo. The Israelis looked upon that as a serious threat to their ability to fly over Lebanon and so forth. Of course, the Syrians said, "The Israelis have no right to fly over Lebanon. They have no right. They have attacked our troops. They are violating Lebanese air space. They violated an understanding against attacking Syrian troops. We have moved these missiles in to defend our troops." The United States embarked on – and I think Phil Habib was the primary negotiator – an effort to persuade the Syrians to withdraw their missiles that was not successful. So, you had this period of mounting tension in late '81 and the first half of '82 caused by these events, by continuing Palestinian PLO attacks against Israel, and it was a crisis that everyone could see coming. I remember sitting on my balcony of my apartment in Damascus, which overlooked Assad's house, early Sunday morning at about 7:00. I had my radio on and was listening to the BBC. The first story was that Palestinians had attempted to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London, Shlomo Argov, and had shot him, seriously wounding him in the head. He was in a coma and it was not known whether he was going to live or not. I listened to that and said, "The Israelis are going to invade Lebanon today." I called up the ambassador, Paganelli, and told him this. I said, "It's my belief that this is the excuse that Sharon's been looking for and that there will be an invasion." In fact, they did invade that day.

Q: Did the Syrians come to us during this invasion which led to the siege of Beirut? There was fighting with Syria, wasn't there?

ABINGTON: Yes, there was, but the Israelis – and this is where Sharon was roundly condemned by the United States and in fact a commission of inquiry in Israel felt that Sharon had misled Begin and the Israeli cabinet as to what his intentions were. It was initially called the Peace for Galilee Campaign. Initially the stated intentions were to go up to the Litani River and clear out the Palestinian presence in southern Lebanon. People anticipated that there would be an Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon for some period of time in order to keep the PLO out. But at that point, people really did not know what Sharon's intentions were. Meanwhile, the Mossad and Sharon and Begin had been negotiating secretly with the Maronites in Beirut, with the Gemayels and the Chamouns. The Israelis and the Lebanese Maronites, the Phalangists, had worked out this scheme that the U.S. was really not aware of to drive out the Palestinians from Lebanon - I don't know if the intention was to drive out the Syrians as well – and to install a very strong Phalangist government in Beirut that would enter into an unofficial alliance with Israel. This was all unbeknown to American policymakers. So, this was an unfolding event. Every day that the invasion went on, Israel kept expanding the scope of its military operations. The Syrians from the beginning were very alarmed by this. They saw this as a crisis. They deeply mistrusted Sharon and Begin and they called in Paganelli daily to consult about it. But as the war went on, as the Israelis crossed the Litani, they came into contact with Syrian tank units and they fought pretty fierce battles near Beirut and in the Bekaa and they destroyed a number of Israeli tank units. They attacked the Syrian missile units that had been deployed in the Bekaa and destroyed all of them without losing a single Israeli plane. The Syrian air force, which had carried on periodic clashes with Israel over Lebanese air space, came to the defense of Syrian forces in the Bekaa. In what was a stunning air battle, the Israelis shot down something like 85 Syrian jet fighters without losing a single plane of their own. At that point, the Israelis had uncontested control of Lebanese air space and the siege of Beirut started.

RICHARD E. UNDELAND
Public Affairs Officer
Damascus (1979-1983)

Richard E. Undeland was born in 1930 in Omaha, Nebraska. He graduated from Harvard University in 1952 with a degree in English literature, received an M.B.A. from Stanford University, and studied in Egypt from 1955-1956. In addition to Syria, Mr. Undeland served in Vietnam, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in July of 1994.

Q: Well, in 1979 you brushed up your Arabic and went off to Damascus.

UNDELAND: That's right.

Q: You were there from 1979-1983.

UNDELAND: Yes, a total of four years. I was once more PAO, in charge of USIS in Syria. It was an assignment I wanted and went after, encouraged to do so by Talcott Seelye, who was in the African bureau at State when I was in NEA/P before going out to Damascus as ambassador. I had been there a few times on short visits and liked what I saw. The prospect of that assignment interested me for several reasons. Politically, it was important, for Syria was central to peace or war in the Middle East, because it had the capability to prevent many things from happening, whatever it might stand for and do positively. Secondly, although relations with the United States were strained -- we in USIS faced severe limitations, restrictions and suspicions -- we also had a good deal going for us, with our center, active exchanges and widespread contacts, which could be imaginatively exploited. Thirdly, I think that almost any diplomat with an Arab World specialization would feel he had not touched one of the key bases, were he not to have an assignment in Syria, that most Arab of all Arab countries. Here, I am speaking in cultural terms.

I had not realized just how deeply U.S.-Syrian divisions went, nor how profoundly they impacted on the USIS program, until on the scene, but once there, dealing with them added spice and challenge to pursuing our aims and conducting our activities. I have never encountered a friendlier, more gracious people, who down deep inside were so very well inclined towards the U.S. on everything save our Mideast policy. This contrasted with almost nothing good or positive to be said about official relationships. The dichotomy set the framework for what we did and, for me provided endless variety and fascination.

Looking for an initial example on the down side, our relations with the local press were not only bad, but worse yet, almost non-existent. Editors-in-chief would see me when I sought them out, as I did about once a year, but both of us knew full well we were only going through motions. Of course no placement, not that I'm big on that, but no dialogue and no interest in our materials, nor what I had to say or anything else. The three daily Arabic newspapers, different in name only for the content was virtually identical, carried an unending litany of American ills and wrong doings. The editors were more polite than what appeared in their papers, but I heard much of the same from them; they were probably glad when our get-togethers had ended. I made these calls to keep a foot in the door and to let them know I was paying attention to them but wasn't afraid of them.

Q: What other gaps were there in interrelationships?

UNDELAND: The military and police of course. I didn't have my usual contact with the secret police in Syria and probably couldn't have. The ruling Ba'ath party was closed off to us, with some ironic gaps, and this did not mean only the official party structure in itself, but also most of the professional associations, which in most places we deal with extensively -- lawyers, teachers, engineers, doctors and the others, including even sports. Except on a limited and cagy basis, the Presidency was off bounds, including its press office. However, they very much wanted our information bulletins, so one of the President's interpreters and a pretty good friend of USIS would daily come by the center for it. He also taught in the English department at Damascus University, so he could come in his professorial guise. Later, he found this burdensome and worked it out that we could deliver our stuff at the Presidency back door, but it had to be given personally to the designated doorman and only him.

While contacts with professional groups affiliated with to the Party were circumscribed, we had some excellent ties with individual members and sometimes informal, indirect access to the organizations. An awful lot depended on who we knew and who trusted us. Also, for those with the Ba'ath Party affiliations, they had to have sufficient cover and/or confidence.

Instructions were put out by the Ba'ath not to have anything to do with us, which were usually obeyed on the institutional level. With individual members, the picture was, as I have just indicated, mixed. Working against development of these ties, except on a quiet, discreet basis, was the fact that officials and others did not want to leave themselves open to charges of consorting with the enemy, a handy tool in the hands of a rival or an opponent. I made only a few formal visits to these party affiliated organizations, except when we had a visitor or program they wanted and for which or whom, specific approval had been gotten. It was never simple, but somehow more easy for a visitor or something coming from outside than for us permanently on the scene. Yet, Party members were among those I saw the most of, in their offices, at our home or at my office or the cultural center. If you wanted contradictions, Syria was the place to be.

Q: And others?

UNDELAND: The phones were obviously tapped, although we always assumed they were in other countries as well, but in Syria it was obvious and flagrant. Once I picked up the phone at home to make a call out only to hear somebody on the line, ordering chickens, so I testily asked him what the hell was going-on on my phone line. My "listener" politely asked me to be patient; he would be off the phone in a minute and I could then call. One didn't even try to hide the phone tapping.

When we invited guests to our home, and we did a lot of this entertaining, anyone working for the Government, and that meant professors, archaeologists, many lawyers and doctors as well as what we usually think of as government officials, was supposed to have Foreign Ministry approval in order to attend. When I arrived, this was enforced in a slack way with nearly every name I submitted approved, but during my last year the screws were tightened down, so much so that having up to 80% capriciously turned down became the norm. The way the system worked was that I would send the invitations to the Ministry, which would stamp the ones it approved and return only those for delivery. I complained both directly and indirectly, but to no effect, so I countered this by stopping sending out written invitations at all. Instead, I did the inviting entirely by phone, so there was nothing to stamp. A few Syrians stayed away, but most came and were amused by my tactic, one noting it was a very Syrian solution. The Ministry obviously knew what I was doing, but didn't give me any trouble. It's a story that illustrates several things: rules, rules, rules. The way they were often ignored. The ability to laugh and poke fun at them in a police state. The good hearted welcome given once on a you-understand-us/we-understand-you basis.

Travel was surprisingly easy all over the country. Heavily armed police and security service types -- there were 5 essentially competing and nasty secret police or security organizations -- were everywhere, but they rarely bothered us, although we did have a couple of worrisome near run-ins concerning American Fulbright students in Syria for an academic year to perfect their

Arabic, with one we had to get out of the country in a hurry. I personally was prepared to go anywhere in the city without batting an eyelash and did so all the time. I've never been in a safer environment; the ever-present security types left me alone. Traveling throughout the country, you would have to go through police check points, but I was always waved on through or when stopped, merely showed my Syrian diplomatic ID card and was sent on my way with a friendly, *ahlan wa sahlam* (you are welcome). With the police and security types, it was never a relaxed atmosphere, but yet there was a lot of live and let live, so long as internal politics and security were not concerned. Still, they were a capricious lot and you never knew what might happen. I knew most if not all of our Syrian staffers at USIS were called in by the *mukhabarat* to report on USIS activities and my travels and contacts; indeed, a couple of these FSNs always came directly to me afterwards and told me what they were asked and what they said.

But I do not want to dwell only on the negatives and absurdities, though they were legion and will certainly crop up again as I talk on, but rather turn to the assignment, which was a good one, a rewarding one for me and the post and, I think in the long run, the U.S. In our modest ways, we were helping pave the way for a more open, more thoughtful, more efficient Syria, when and if the politics changed and made this possible. Ours was of necessity a long range view, and I credit NEA and other parts of USIA for being willing to look a long distance down the road and not judge and plan and commit resources only for the immediate.

I should mention one very positive thing we had going for us in that land of paradox; nearly every Syrian family seemed to have had a favorable or positive personal relationship with the United States in one way or another. They had relatives who studied in our universities or who had immigrated and reported back on the land of milk and honey. These immigrants, taken all in all, had done or were doing very well. Syrian students had usually excelled in American universities and others with American experiences reported or came back, reporting their liking of what they had done and observed.

The USIS exchange programs were as good as those I have managed anywhere. Of all our activities, they have always had my top priority, for this is where attitudes are most profoundly affected. Syria earned a reputation in USIA for consistently high quality IV grantees, and indeed they were almost all very good. Our allotment was some 17 per year, but we used up all of these grants as early on as possible and like a pest kept dunning Washington for more. It was a tactic that worked well, and the final number of grants was at least double the original figure each of the 4 years I was there. No other activity allowed us to spread our nets further, for it was the way we not only got to know new people, but know them and their organizations and activities in considerable depth. It is the only country I have been in where the returned IV grantees played a key role in recommending others for these 3 to 4 week visits. In a country where favoritism and nepotism was rife, it was remarkable that I did not get single bad recommendation from an earlier grant holder. Similarly, we went to persons we knew well in institutions, the universities, the Damascus and Aleppo city governments, even the Ministry of Defense for suggestions on candidates, and came up with some splendid people, whom we had not previously known.

The IV program did more for USIS's reputation in Syria than any other of our activities, with Fulbright and other exchanges coming second. We also got a lot from the library at the center, the annual English teaching seminars put on jointly with the British Council and from our

support for American involvement in archaeology and antiquities.

Let me relate some specifics on the IVs, for they say a lot about us, about Syria and about how we operated. The Vice President of the University of Damascus asked me if we might have an available IV grant, for he felt American exposure for a Soviet Ph.D. engineering professor, who was a main Party leader on campus and therefore influential and powerful, would pay dividends for the U.S. and for the University. I was receptive, met this professor and was duly impressed; he went off and came back a changed person, emerging as one of the strongest defenders of American education and scholarship on the campus, as well as being outspokenly pro-American. He opened up for us the two faculties of engineering, till then virtually fiefdoms of the Soviet educated teaching staff. The following year, we put Fulbright professors in one of them and organized group IV programs with other Soviet educated professors. When the Party tried to get us to include a couple of unimpressive and unqualified members from the English Department in a group project, I put the problem of quality before the engineering professor; it was the last I heard of those candidates. He insisted on introducing me to the Party chief at the University, whose office was an exact replica of the president's, only located one floor down. My visit was in itself no big deal, but it facilitated access and programming in previously nearly off bounds parts of the University that, from what I heard, infuriated the Soviets.

This same professor later spent a year at Vanderbilt on a Fulbright. He had his doctorate from the Moscow Institute of Bridges, Viaducts and Tunnels; his American experiences led him to say he could now think and reason as an engineer, where formerly he could only spout back what he had been fed and memorized. There is a nearly identical story to be told about a 3-person IV project for professors of the University of Aleppo Engineering Faculty. These people carried the message of America in ways and to places we never could have on our own.

But how did the IV and other exchange programs work? We couldn't invite any specific person, according the rules set forth by the Syrians, but only designate categories, which we sent in *Notes Verbales* to the Foreign Ministry, the part of the government officially charged with selecting the individuals. But what really happened was we found the person we wanted, made sure of his/her interest and probable availability. Only then did we craft the *note*, which we designed to fit the person or persons we desired and as much as possible exclude all others. We often got absurdly specific, but Foreign Affairs never objected. Sometimes we would go to the institution where the prospective grantee worked to be sure of approval; sometimes we would leave this step up to him or her. In any case, the desired candidate would get the required okays up the line and then he and his boss or influential friend would put pressure on the MFA to approve, while keeping up the dialogue with us. The Ministry's written approval, however, did not once in my memory arrive until the grantee had left and often not until after he returned. Meanwhile, we had gotten the Ministry's informal assurance that all was or would be in order, and at that point we sent the grantee off. Once we did get back an official rejection after the concerned professor had left for the States; we just ignored it and after once he was back left it to him and the university to work it out, which they did. There were endless variations on the approval process. We invited the Dean of Architecture of Damascus University, who was well connected in the Party, and asked him about the *note* to the Foreign Ministry. He said not to bother; for he would "just give the Minister a ring, and that would do it." It did. On another program, we nominated the librarian at the Ministry of Defense, who told us to forget about the MFA and instead send a letter signed by me to the Minister of Defense, for "Defense never has

to concern itself with Foreign Affairs."

I tried to break the ban against our dealing with Party organizations with a 3-person group IV project for the teachers syndicate, which I looked on as a relatively innocuous test, and for a while everything seemed to be moving ahead. Then the road blocks appeared. I was prepared to write it off, when a senior syndicate official came to me to say they had finally broken the project free from the ban, but there was such competition over who would be selected that they needed time to sort it out. Would it be possible to put it off for a year? I thought it would, and we did so, but they still couldn't get their act together and it fell through. Then two of the three persons we particularly wanted called on me, saying they were ready to go privately, using their vacation time and acting outside the syndicate framework. That was fine with me and off they went. When once back we had access to individuals in this organization as never before. By the way, the Party shortly thereafter reasserted its ban for the syndicate, which meant no more official IVs from there, but the doors for us had already been opened wide, so long as we entered quietly.

These ins and outs were a source of frustration, but also of stimulation and just plain fun. I loved playing the game, getting things to work that by the rules shouldn't have, or, when need be, shifting or ignoring the rules.

Q: Tell me more about the universities, how you dealt with them and what you thought of them. Were you in any way cut off from them?

UNDELAND: As I have indicated, we weren't usually cut off at all, though dealings were often complex, with the line between points A and B almost never a straight one. We had 2 or 3 Fulbright professors at Damascus University, one or two at Aleppo and for one year one in Latakia. We had American Fulbright students at Damascus U every year I was there, most of whom made astounding progress in perfecting their Arabic. We put on a few exhibits on campuses. We brought in speakers to participate in symposia and give lectures. The cultural center library was a drawing card for students in the English Department. I have mentioned the IV grants.

The largely Western educated leadership of the universities, the presidents, vice presidents and many deans were bravely fighting an steep uphill battle, trying to maintain standards and avoid becoming Soviet style institutions. They were gradually losing ground, but we and they hoped they would be able to hang on and remain with significant influence and effectiveness until better times arrived, and things could be turned around. The problems, which weighed most heavily, were the heavy hand of the Party and the large number of teachers coming back with doctorates from the Soviet Union. There were hundreds of Syrians returning yearly with graduate degrees, compared to a mere handful from the West, primarily the U.S., U.K. and France. Our limited resources, and perhaps possibilities, could effect only so much "conversion," as we had with the engineer, whose story I've told. Once absorbed in the universities, most of them understandably defended their Soviet and Bloc credentials, and the mere weight of them took its toll.

Party control was injurious for a number of reasons. Members got all the best student housing and could not be failed; this was known everywhere, but of course was an unwritten rule. Those

with new Ph.D.s had to be Party members to be hired as teachers. The importance of the Party bred huge cynicism and fostered a lowering of standards, the latter abetted by the annual increase in number of students admitted every year on orders from party and government, and over the objections of professors and administrators, including many of the Soviet trained ones. Capacity of facilities, size of teaching staff, funding and quality of education were just ignored; it was a purely political decision. The sad result was that the once esteemed Syrian universities had lost much of their standing and were getting worse.

USIS and the British Council played an important role, a psychological one, for with our centers, our programs, our interest and our contacts, we contributed to the battle being waged by the Western trained educators much more than one would have expected by merely adding up our activities. A dean and English Department professor, both with Brit doctorates, told me we should never get discouraged, give up our support or back off, for they had no one to whom to turn and to look to except us. They both wondered if we realized how important this was. The "we" here is both USIS and British Council, which many Syrians saw as virtually two peas from the same pod, and in many ways we were.

The Brit-American connection is worth mentioning. At Damascus University, the vice-president had his Ph.D. from Wisconsin; at Aleppo, the President returned from an AID sponsored visit one of the converted. Meanwhile, a vice-president at Aleppo and a couple of deans, one later vice-president at Damascus had U.K. Ph.D.s. The latter had been to the U.S. as IVs or on other programs, and the American degree holders knew England well. This double exposure was more than just reinforcing, for it carried a mystique which served all of our interests extremely well. Remember that the British got the French out of Syria at the end of World War II, and until the turn to the Soviets, the Brits trained the Syrian Air Force and were consequently respected and liked. In Syria, we benefitted as greatly from what the Brits had done, as they had from our Syrian connections. This was more evident there than in any other place I've been. At a farewell dinner put on for us by the British ambassador, I made in my remarks this mutually reinforcing point to the Syrian invitees, who had both U.K. and U.S. experiences, to which they wholeheartedly agreed.

Q: I've heard it said sometimes that probably the most successful exchange program from the United States point of view has been citizens from other countries sent to the Soviet Union by Soviets because things are so miserable there. You spoke about Egypt; did you find this was a factor in Syria or did they come out committed to the Soviet way when they came back?

UNDELAND: Undoubtedly some did return committed to one extent or another, though I personally never met a single one, who had been wholeheartedly won over. I am convinced it is right to say that at least the vast majority were not. Most had experienced things they did not like. They found a deeply ingrained racism in the Soviet Union, an anti-Arab sentiment, an anti-foreign bias, that rubbed them very much the wrong way. They were looked down on by Soviet students, who in general wanted little to do with them, although they were relatively well treated by the authorities. The Russians made sure that they passed every course and got their degrees, which in turn set them aside and fostered ill feelings towards them. So many spoke of the Soviet Union in negative terms. There was some feeling, just how widespread I cannot say, among these Syrians that they came back not all that well educated, a criticism of the system, not the students, which left its stigma on them.

Stories abounded of bad relations with Russians and the Soviet bureaucracy from those who had studied or otherwise been in the USSR. One who got an advanced degree in theater in the Soviet Union, had married a Russian, and, back in Syria, became a senior official in the Ministry of Culture. He regaled me time after time with a litany of their problems with Soviet officialdom over visas, possessions and status, and his Russian wife joined in, heartily agreeing. I met others with similar tales of woe.

I might point out the Soviets had a number of programs for sending Syrians off for study -- the official exchanges with the Ministry of Higher Education, those who were invited by the Ambassador, scholarships from trade unions and the various professional associations. Special arrangements were available for children of Party members. It was next to impossible to find out how many Syrians were studying in Soviet universities or attending training courses in the Soviet Union -- the Ministry of Higher Education admitted to me it just didn't know -- but it was up in the thousands. So, there were lots and lots of Syrians who were going there.

The Syrian Atomic Energy Commission provides a case in point. It wanted to deal only with the U.S. and they kept coming after us to get places for graduate study in American universities. They were consistently turning down almost unlimited Soviet offers. We got to know fairly well some of the people that were involved with this, and I never heard anywhere more disparaging remarks about the Soviet education and training. I must add that however much courted and loved, this was a problem area for us and we were not very cooperative. They said they were up to nothing but agricultural and medical isotopes and that sort of things, but who knows. However, my point is to demonstrate the prestige and standing we had and the near total lack of it the Russians had.

I have talked about education. Your question, however, is broader in scope. I certainly got the idea that almost all civilian contacts with the Soviet Union left the Syrians unsatisfied and unimpressed. Certainly it was true of the people in circles we frequented. I can't speak for those in the military, but they were brothers and cousins and the like of those we did know and indirectly I heard nothing, which would indicate anything remotely resembling "conversions" coming from the military's time in the Soviet Union or contacts with Soviet advisors in Syria.

Q: What was the feeling, we're talking about the 1979-1983 period, from the Embassy and people you talked to and your own personal feelings? What was the Syrian-Soviet relationship? Were the Syrians in the pockets of the Soviets, or where were they going? How did you feel about that?

UNDELAND: Some of these ties were very close. Military equipment and training were Soviet. Trade was relatively small, but not insignificant and was promoted. There was not a whole lot of economic aid, because it came mainly through loans, and the Russians were demanding hard currency repayment. The media did not go overboard on the relationship, but what they said about the Soviets was positive, and the so-called fruits of the eternal friendship and cooperation was a tune played quite regularly, if not very convincingly. High level visits took place all the time, and there were many other exchanges. But the Syrians were not in the pockets of the Soviets. It was a case of being willing to go along with them on almost everything, so long as the

issues were of no real importance to Syria. If they were, then Syria went its own way and did its own thing, agreeing with the Russians only if there were real agreement. If the Soviets wanted to apply pressure through their military assistance programs and lesser economic assistance, would it have worked? I rather think it would not have. To my knowledge that kind of pressure was not applied, at least not on any major concern. The Soviets must have foreseen likely pitfalls and known the Syrians were not in their pocket. While this was my own view, I think it fair to say that most other diplomats and observers on the scene would have agreed with me.

A few military examples. The Syrians mobilized a couple of divisions and sent them to the Jordanian border without, as the Embassy learned, telling the Soviets, which infuriated the Soviet Embassy and Soviet military advisors. That the Soviets didn't know and were surprised speaks to the quality and depth of even the military relationship. Likewise, I heard the Syrians kept the Soviets in the dark over what they were doing in Lebanon. It seemed almost as though the Syrians were saying, we get along well enough in lots of ways, but remember you are as much, if not more, dependent on us than we are on you.

While we were there, the Israelis attacked and destroyed the Syrian SAM missiles in the Bekaa Valley, as well as destroying most of the Syrian Air Force. This military disaster was taken by many Syrians I knew to prove that Soviets equipment, tactics and training were vastly inferior to the American. There was the often heard refrain, "of course, they are only giving us the old models, not their best, but even their best isn't as good as yours." The Soviets replaced this equipment rapidly, but did they regain their standing? With the military and top leadership, I can't say, but with the Syrians I was seeing, definitely not. I rather doubt it also in the larger picture, for nearly everyone I knew had relatives and friends in the military, whose views would undoubtedly be reflected in comments coming my way.

It wasn't only that the Soviets were in many circles unpopular and looked down on, but also they were targets, for one way the Muslim Brothers and perhaps others in opposition could attack the Assad Government was to go after the Soviets. A number, particularly military advisors, were assassinated. The total sticking in my mind is 14 killed during the 4 years we were in Syria, along with rumors of many more. At a reception, a Syrian friend jovially asked if I'd heard the latest -- two Soviets military officers had just been killed in Hama. He was happy about this and thought I would also be. When I tried to reply in kind, and admittedly not in very good taste, that it was important to make sure no mistake was made and those singled out to be bumped off were not Americans, he came back, "don't worry, we would never mistake an American for a Soviet."

Of the 4 major bombings that occurred in Damascus, supposedly by the Muslim Brotherhood, one caused casualties and did major damage to the building housing the Soviet military assistance group and on the upper floors, housing for the advisors and dependents. Many Syrians treated this incident as a kind of a joke, at least had no regrets. They just didn't like the Russians. When you identified yourself as an American in a shop or taxi, you would often hear what bad people the Russians were, how rude they were and how they had no real interest in Syria or Arabs. Some this was undoubtedly for our benefit, but it happened so often it had to be more than that.

I don't want to push this too far, for we were seeing the Syrians who wanted to see us, and they

would naturally not be those won over by the other side. I must add the Soviets did a few things well. Their cultural center was an active, first class operation, run by a dynamic and well liked, fluent Arabic speaker. It was jumping every day.

Q: I would have felt that this was a particularly bad time in Syria because of Camp David and the peace between Israel and Egypt. I recall the saying that there can be no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria. Syria at that point, with the Egyptians out, had the most effective and largest army probably, must have known that war was no option at all. It must have just about hit home when you arrived.

UNDELAND: Fair enough, but it was a complex situation. Assad talked about reaching military parity with Israel. Did he really think that was possible? My guess is he didn't, but who knows? How much faith did he have in his military beyond controlling the situation in Syria and Lebanon, particularly after destruction of his missiles in Lebanon and of his air force?

There was the supposedly planned coup by mostly air force officers, which was uncovered and reportedly led to the execution of some 50 of them. I heard more than a few times that loyalty was more important than military competence. How good the army really was or would be against a modern opponent were questions Syrians themselves would raise privately and then offer pretty negative assessments. The sizable number of broken down military vehicles seen on the side of roads all over the country seemed to be saying something.

Syrians I knew were convinced another war with Israel would mean a catastrophic defeat, and it therefore must be avoided, whatever one thought of the enemy. They felt this was also Assad's view and however much they might criticize him and his regime, privately of course, he consistently got high marks on this. The total lack of incidents on the Golan Heights and Syria's scrupulous adherence to the U.N. monitored cease fire were widely welcomed. I never heard anyone suggest it be scrapped.

There was a Soviet element in the equation, for Syrians were convinced that whatever the Israelis might do, the Soviet response would be lots of words and maybe a few extra arms, but nothing like the real support which would be needed. "It wouldn't be like the way you always back up the Israelis", a Syrian once told me.

While Syrians saw no choice but to accept Israel as part of the Middle East, every Syrian I knew deeply mistrusted them. None believed Israel wanted a true peace, but rather they were after territorial expansion, that is keeping the Golan, and humiliating the Arabs. No war and co-existence yes, but a real peace? Well, maybe, but only after a long time, a very long time.

Q: There are a number of major things that happened while you were there. You were talking about the Muslim Brotherhood. Did that have any effect on what you were doing? How did you perceive it?

UNDELAND: It didn't effect us in USIS directly, but the challenge to the regime from the Muslim Brotherhood or whomever was the internal political issue in the country. The authority of the Government was challenged by a group of violent incidents, beginning with killing of a

group of mostly Alawite cadets in an Aleppo military school shortly before I arrived. Then, there were the 4 major bombings in Damascus and the killing of Russians which I have mentioned, but the climax came in Hama, when an armed Islamic group tried to take over the city, some said start a nation-wide uprising to throw out the regime and end Alawi dominance. They killed a number of party and government officials. The Government response was massive and brutal, calculated to obliterate the insurgents and warn others of what retribution awaited them if they revolted. The uprising was labeled the work of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Jordan was accused of supporting, but whoever they were organizationally, they mounted a serious, organized challenge. Depending on your sources, the number killed in Hama ranged between 20,000 and 30,000; this bloody retaking of the city was the work of the President's brother, Rifaat al Assad, and his special forces. Apparently a standard tactic used was to level with artillery any building from which so much as a single shot came, killing all inside.

I drove north to Aleppo -- it was a long planned trip -- only a few days after the fighting in Hama, and on the way up was routed by security forces to the east of the city on back roads, so I did not see anything of the city. However, on the way back 3 or 4 days later, all traffic was sent right through it. The destruction was staggering. The large blue domed mosque you had had to make a little loop around on the main road in the center of the city had been totally leveled and the adjacent cemetery laid waste. Where there had been the buildings of the old city, you now had a clear view through to the Orontes River. One of the big water wheels was gone. I had visited Hama several times and had trouble believing what had happened, how much was just no longer there.

Q: Did the United States play up Hama at all?

UNDELAND: No, but then, should we have done so? The Embassy reported back to Washington what it gleaned, including what I heard and saw, and I think the Department spokesman fielded some questions, but the USG didn't publicly make a big deal out of it. Part of it was there was little hard information, for the Syrian Government first denied and then played down what had happened. Correspondents were not allowed in. Many details came from Phalange and other Lebanese sources, which were inherently unreliable for they had anti-Syrian axes to grind. Stories were everywhere, but it was hard to track them down and separate truth from fiction. The tale of British correspondent Geoffrey Hurst is illuminating. Denied permission to go there, he traveled to Aleppo, where he hired a cab and went south to Hama, arriving at the height of the shooting. His reports of what was happening, filed a few days later after he got to Lebanon, were categorically denied by the Syrians, and there wasn't anybody else's stuff to back him up. Hurst didn't make the splash he would have with any reliable confirmation. The Syrians played their cards well, whatever you may think of their game.

A similar example came after the grenade assassination attempt against the President and the purported ensuing killing of prisoners at the prison at Tadmur, or Palmyra as we call it. When the story emerged in bits and pieces some time later, there wasn't anything hard to offset the Syrian blanket denial. It got very small play in media in the West or anywhere else.

The only USIS involvement in any of this strife was of a parochial nature and concerned a Fulbright professor teaching English at the University of Aleppo. On two occasions his teenage

son was fired at or at least there was firing near him when he went outside their apartment. Shooting between security and presumably Brotherhood types had become by 1980 a disconcerting feature of the Aleppo landscape, but it had not previously occurred in this area near the University. The second time was understandably too much for the family, for on that one, he had to hit the ground as bullets whistled over his head; they felt they had to come out right away. I jumped into the office van with our senior FSN and drove up to Aleppo to extricate them, square things with the landlord, explain to the University president why I was pulling him out, load them and their belongings in the van and return to Damascus. Everyone I saw in Aleppo was chagrined this had happened, for they felt their sense of hospitality and propriety had come under fire as well as the professor's son. The University was somewhat mollified, when I told the President we planned to have another Fulbright professor there the following year, provided the situation calmed down.

Q: How did the situation in Iran play in Syria, that is, from the American point of view. What were reactions to the war between Iraq and Iran?

UNDELAND: Syrians officially, and to a smaller extent popularly, lined up with the Iranians, partly out of approving of Iran's anti-Israeli stand and, for the believers, dislike of the Iraqi version of the Ba'ath Party. Privately, most Damascenes I knew had little use for either Iraqis or Iranians. The border was closed between Syria and Iraq; throughout my tour, their relations ranged from bad to worse. Iran was wooing Syria, giving it a special deal on the purchase of Iranian oil at below international market prices. However, on the other side and obviously not openly, some Syrians had problems that Syria, an Arab nation, was supporting a non-Arab state in a war against an Arab country.

Iranian supported groups in Lebanon were receiving arms through Syria and other kinds of help. This was the subject of some moment, but not a main conversation topic, at least not with me. People knew in general terms it was going on, but lacked specifics and, for the most part, also lacked interest. Whenever an Iranian official visited Syria, and its Foreign Minister, Velayati I think was his name, did several times, the red carpet was rolled out and the media carried fulsome stories, but few Syrians were much moved by this hoopla.

Q: Our attention was very heavily focused on the fact that for 444 days we had hostages from the Embassy in Iran held by the Iranian government. No matter what the policy considerations were, Americans felt you were either with us or against us on this particular issue. How did this play out in Syria, which officially had much more of a friendly relationship with Iran than most of the other Arab countries?

UNDELAND: I'm sure the hostage issue got some Syrian media coverage and came up in conversations, but it was not greatly emphasized; in fact, I'm drawing a blank on trying to recall specific instances, with one exception. Syrians could not conceive that we could have so thoroughly botched the rescue mission. Interlocutors could not, would not, believe that American equipment had not worked properly and American planning and execution had fallen down so badly. It was not their image of things and ways American. I once found myself being told by a group of Damascenes that the Iranians must have gotten a secret laser weapon or some such from the Russians. Only that could explain the American debacle.

Q: Why don't we talk about Lebanon. Israel went into Lebanon when, in 1981?

UNDELAND: At the time, this dominated Syrian thinking and media coverage, and for once the two were nearly as one, convinced the United States had at least supported, and probably promoted, the Israeli attack. Our arguments to the contrary fell on deaf ears. A point used time and time again to make this case was that the U.S. had stood behind the attack by providing the arms the Israelis were using. Reports from American and other western correspondents coming out of Beirut tended to confirm such views. During the main attack on Beirut, every night, all night long, you'd hear the wailing of the ambulances, bringing over the wounded to the Palestinian Hospital in Damascus, with the overload going to other Damascus hospitals.

Syrians found our statements of trying to get the Israelis to stop the attack as unconvincing, if not downright mendacious, and certainly ineffectual. Nonetheless, our relations with individual Syrians remained as warm and cordial as ever, and they continued to speak openly to us, so long as the venue was not public, that is, so long as our interlocutors didn't have to look over their shoulders to see who might be overhearing them. The attack on Beirut was taken as crowning proof, not that they felt they really needed it, of Israel's fundamentally evil nature. Private criticism of the U.S. was somewhat more muted, often running along the line of "can't you finally see how bad the Israelis really are? How can the American government really support them so blindly?" I was struck at how often such sentiments came forth more in sorrow than anger. We were not nearly as much under the gun as you might have expected. If I remember correctly, the center remained open and in business throughout, with activities going on pretty much as usual. I made my rounds, including visits to the *souks* and found people, as always, their amicable selves. This again did not mean that Syrians did not feel strongly about what was happening, for they did, but they tended to put that issue in its own compartment and not have it get in the way, while they dealt with others things.

Not a Syrian story, but nonetheless illuminating, is that of the USIS driver, the son of a prominent Jerusalem family, who refused to go to school, and while his brothers were prominent doctors and lawyers, he was but a USIS chauffeur. One day his driving was inexplicably not just silly but downright dangerous. I asked if he was sick, and he said no. After a near collision, I took over the wheel and once back at the office, he came to my office tearfully apologizing. And it all came out. He had two sons among the PLO fighters in Beirut and was so terrified they would be killed he could think of nothing else. Then he blurted out, "we Palestinians should hate the United States for all you've done, for your bombs and your shells that are killing us. But we can't, because of all the Palestinians, the only lucky ones, the only ones that are really doing well, are the 100,000 you took into the United States. These are the only happy Palestinians anywhere." At least a year later, a Syrian told me nothing had impressed him more about the Americans than our keeping on a Palestinian with sons in the PLO. I told him the above story, which he punctuated with "yes, yes" comments. By the way, I wondered if Embassy security knew this, but they must have, for my driver's oldest son was in charge of maintenance for the GSO shop.

Going back to Lebanon, the Syrians let us and everybody else know they were going to continue giving their support to the cause of Palestinian liberation and to groups they dominated or

heavily influenced. They had always had problems with Yasser Arafat, but got along well with the Hawatmeh, Jabril, Habash and other leaders, who shared the characteristic of being more extreme and of accepting, or at least going along with, Syrian dictates. They had offices, some their headquarters, in Damascus. Syrian security services watched the Palestinians' every step carefully, which the Palestinians resented but could do nothing about.

Amusingly, I was thought to be in contact with at least one of these organizations. Quite regularly I visited the Syrian Writers Union offices, which was located in the same building as the PFLP or DPFLP, I forget which, and my visiting that place did not pass unnoticed. Several Syrians rather slyly asked me about these contacts, not believing for a minute I was only concerned with the Writers' Union.

Syrian attitudes, and here I'm not talking about official ones, recognized and supported the Palestinian cause, how often I heard that phrase used, as a given. They saw it very largely in moral terms, and their support was an article of faith. I heard much criticism of the Assad regime, its repressiveness, its inefficiency, its harmful policies, but I cannot think of one time I heard it criticized for its stand on Palestine and the Palestinians.

Q: At one point one of our battleships fired on Syrian positions in Lebanon near Beirut, didn't it?

UNDELAND: It wasn't, as I recall, specifically Syrian army positions, but it could have been Syrian backed Palestinians, some of which had Syrian so-called volunteers, but in any case, the battleship did open up with its 16 inch guns against targets in the Lebanese mountains, which rise up just behind the coast. The story was that the firing was often inaccurate due to using outdated ammunition left over from the Second World War, and wayward shells caused unintended damage and many civilian casualties. Accuracy aside, it was an anathema to Syrians that the United States would use the huge guns of battleships against small positions in the mountains. It struck them as being so out of proportion. A dean at Damascus University, put it emotionally this way: "How can you do this? How can you make it impossible for any Arab to be a friend of the United States? What do you think you are accomplishing?"

Q: It was the New Jersey, wasn't it. What about the incident of the American plane that was shot down?

UNDELAND: Now that you mention it, it was the New Jersey.

Details have by now slipped away from me, but two navy planes were fired on over Lebanon, and one shot down, with one of the two-man crew killed and the other captured. The United States moved rapidly to get the captured airman back and the body of the dead pilot. The Embassy was deeply involved, though not me personally. Despite these efforts, nothing happened until Jesse Jackson got into the act, came out to Damascus and succeeded in getting credit for release the prisoner and return the body.

Q: This is a black American pilot, and Jesse Jackson was a black political leader.

UNDELAND: Yes. The Embassy didn't have all that much to do with Jesse Jackson when he

was in Syria, as he did not want it. As I recall, he came once to the Embassy and conferred with the Ambassador only once...

Q: *Bob Paganelli?*

UNDELAND: Paganelli, right...but otherwise dealt directly and alone with the Syrians. The Syrian government used this incident to twit the USG and Embassy, while trying to appear forthcoming and humanitarian and showing no antagonism towards Americans. They found in Jesse Jackson a useful vehicle. It was also a way to bring the incident to an end, for if it had dragged on, it could have become embarrassing to the Syrians, if it hadn't already.

This separating out of the American people from government was not an uncommon Syrian ploy, but at no time did it come up with me more amusingly, at least to me, than during my farewell call in 1983 on the Minister of Culture, Madame Najjar. She became uncharacteristically effusive over a number of projects on which we had collaborated, praised our center and cultural programs, our sending Syrians to the U.S. and bringing Americans to Syria. Then came the old line, "we don't have anything against the American people, but only against your government." I replied, thanking her for the nice words on what we had done, but pointedly noting that our activities were programs of the American government, which I represented, and indeed I was a diplomat. Without a pause, she came right back, "Oh, we don't look on you and what you're doing in that way at all."

Q: *Here you were at stirring times in Damascus as far as what was happening in Lebanon. How about the internal scene?*

UNDELAND: There were many tensions. I have mentioned Hama, the bomb aimed at the Soviets, the Muslim Brotherhood, extricating the Fulbright professor from Aleppo and so forth. While I did not feel in any way threatened by the local scene, the four major bombs that went off in Damascus were not only nasty but telling reminders that all was not well. Of the other 3, one was detonated in a car passing in front of a police station, which killed some 50 policemen and bystanders. Some said this one went off accidentally. Another blew up next to the customs office in the center of the city. Fewer killed by this one but some. The fourth went off at Air Force headquarters, which was across the street from the playground of the American School. Here also about 50 were killed, some from the blast, some from security people firing at anything that moved, including other security people. I was chairman of the school board and rushed down to the school to find every window but one blown out with glass and debris everywhere, but thank God nobody killed or injured. What a mess. We even found a human foot on the playground, not a pretty sight. We were lucky, if you can use this work, it happened a few days before the school year was scheduled to begin, and none of the teachers or students were on the grounds.

Shortly thereafter Syrian security besieged a house in Damascus, killing those inside in a fire fight. They were said to be Muslim Brothers responsible for the bombings. Whatever the truth, that was the end of the bombings. People I knew, who were critical of so much, thought the Government right to clamp down hard on the extremists, whom they equated with the bombers. While criticism of the regime continued, it also was given credit for bringing the bombings to an end.

Q: What was the feeling in the Embassy about American policy at the time? I'm not talking about the official line, but obviously you all have your own ideas. What was the general feeling about that of the new Reagan Administration and the earlier Carter Administration?

UNDELAND: We have been over much of this ground concerning other places, so I really have very little to add. There was some feeling we could have been more active in pursuing a peace settlement and that for us to be effectively mediating or otherwise engaged, we would have to find more middle ground between the Arabs and Israelis and be so seen and accepted by all the parties. As to differences between policies of Carter and Reagan administrations, there was continuity on Middle East peace rather than any startling or dramatic departures. At least this was true once Haig left, and we no longer had to deal with his idea of an Israeli-Saudi anti-communist pact. As to our own, our private views and politics, they ran in several streams as always, but I cannot recall one case of when they got in the way of what we were officially trying to accomplish in the peace area, albeit without measurable success.

Q: Well, now, Talcott Seelye was your Ambassador during the first part of your tour, wasn't he? Didn't he depart giving the interview which attacked U.S. Mideast policy?

UNDELAND: Yes, Seelye was the ambassador and he gave the interview to John Cooley and, wasn't it, Peter Jennings?, the day before he left, before he retired. In it he came down hard on American policy for not taking into account what he felt were the realities in the area and for overly favoring the Israelis.

Q: Were you involved in that one at all?

UNDELAND: Not one bit. I only heard about it, when it was published and I then read it. Talcott himself made the arrangements with these correspondents. Understandably, he was criticized in Washington and elsewhere pretty heavily for having done it. I like and respect Talcott, but had it been me, I wouldn't have done it, at least not until I was officially retired.

Q: Going back to Lebanon, was there in the Embassy a sense of outrage over the bombing and shelling of Beirut? And then what were your reactions to the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila camps?

UNDELAND: Everybody whom I knew, in the Embassy and outside, Arabs and Westerners, was appalled by the attack on Beirut. Remember, the American Government was opposing it, though some felt not decisively and forcefully enough, so there was no real fundamental difference between the official and our private views. What we had to say on where the U.S. stood was greeted with skepticism, more often downright disbelief, by Syrians. We had a credibility problem.

We kept getting first hand reports from journalists, who were coming over from Beirut in cabs sending out their reports and films from Damascus. By the way, Syria made its television studios and up-link facilities available to TV correspondents day and night and, extraordinarily, waived all censorship. Many of us had lived in Beirut, had studied Arabic there, knew it well, so that

reports of this or that being destroyed had a particular immediacy. Reports on Palestinian casualties were punctuated, as I have mentioned, by the nightly wailing of the ambulances bringing the wounded to the hospitals.

A question which kept coming up, although after it was over, was whether Secretary Haig had given the Israelis the green light for the attack or not...

Q: The so-called Wink de Sharon...

UNDELAND: I have not heard that phrase, but it fits. It seemed to me at the time a murky area, and when I read Haig's denial, the murkiness was not dispelled.

The Syrian reaction was in ways strangely muted, for they, on all levels, expected nothing but the worst from the Israelis, and felt what happened in the Sabra and Shatila camps was just two more examples proving them right. A professor took me to task for what he called my naivete for not looking on it as normal behavior from the Israelis. We heard more of the line, "now this has happened, how can you continue to line up with the Israelis, when they supported the killings and showed what they really are?" These comments rarely came in anger, but rather almost quizzically, for they had no problem accepting something so outrageous from the Israelis, but they could not associate it with the America and Americans they knew. Once more, they didn't believe American statements of outrage, for they felt we could have prevented Israeli forces from standing by, in their view abetting, if we had really wanted to. Part of it was giving us credit for more influence than we had, but this is something I, in varying ways and circumstances, have often encountered in the Arab World.

Q: What was your impression of how Bob Paganelli both operated the Embassy and how he dealt with the situation.

UNDELAND: Paganelli shone through well when bluntness, even truculence, and bold honesty were needed. He told Secretary Shultz to the Secretary's dismay and anger that the Syrians had not accepted and would not accept the May 17 Israel-Lebanon agreement. Paganelli had it right.

Jimmy Carter came to Damascus when no longer president and insisted on giving Assad a wholly inappropriate gift that would have been taken very amiss. When Carter's people refused to take this message to Carter, Paganelli barged in and did it himself. The gift was not made. He could and did talk tough to the Foreign Ministry when situations so demanded, and at such times making them squirm a bit was probably for the good.

Much as I admired him for taking these stands, I, and frankly others on his staff, found him abrasive, suspicious, unsubtle, difficult to work with and, frankly, lacking in real understanding of Syria. I had a few run-ins with him, but overall feel I got along reasonably well with him, although I don't think he ever fully trusted me. Embassy morale at one point got so bad that shouting broke out in the chancery cursing him; things sunk to the level that State sent in a psychiatrist. He was paranoid on security.

Q: Dick Veliotis talks about the hard time he had in keeping Paganelli from being fired right there on the scene, because Shultz got so mad about being told the truth.

UNDELAND: That fits in with what I've said. In his book, Shultz writes of his problems with

Paganelli, but never gives him credit for being correct, that is, having events prove him right. It was not one of the Secretary's finer moments, but during that visit to Damascus, he went through a most taxing schedule, while down with the flu and running a high fever. As I have said, this showed Paganelli at his best.

Q: What was your impression, and maybe also the Embassy's point of view, of Assad in this 1979-1983 period?

UNDELAND: We knew very little about Assad. We rarely saw him, nor did others with whom we could talk. I have noted how few our contacts were, except when a high ranking visitor came through, and then there was such a formal, official cast to the meetings that one never got at the man and the way he worked. He almost never met with foreign journalists and had few dealings with Syrians in the Damascus scene that included us. The Syrians we knew were as much in the dark about him as we and other foreign diplomats were. He obviously wanted it that way.

Of course, we did know something about him. Soft spoken, cautious, arguing over the smallest point, projecting himself as the most reasonable person in the leadership echelon, reclusive, shielding his personal life from public view, bright, a tough negotiator or bargainer -- these were some of the characteristics that came through, but they were generalizations which left huge gaps about the real man. Questions on how his decisions were made, with whom he consulted, who were his confidants, basic questions on how Syria was run were carefully concealed. But it was clear he personally was in total control, not permitting the slightest semblance of opposition to him or his views in any area. He was respected, albeit grudgingly, for he had brought stability and, among some, a feeling his Syria was more important on the area and world stages.

At one point there was much speculation about his health, with stories of tumors and cancer, a weak heart, mysterious stomach disorders, to mention those I now recall. Photos showed him thinner and set off a spate of theories or rumors on what malady he had and how serious it was. It later came out, whether true or not is another matter, he had decided to lose weight and had taken up jogging.

While the security mechanisms of the state were with justification hated and feared, and there was much criticism of those around him, many Syrians looked quite benignly on the President himself, offering excuses like, "he couldn't have known...he was too busy with other things...his health hasn't been good"...and so forth. The most feared and disliked person in the country was his brother Rifaat, along with his private army. Part of the President's standing came from the fear that if Hafez went, Rifaat would take over.

The Ba'ath Party was important because of its institutional, organizational and stabilizing role in the country, but it was never anything more than a total reflection of the President and was wholly subservient to him. In many ways, Assad was a leader much out of the Stalin mold and the institutions around him had similarities with Soviet counterparts, though I don't want to seem to be setting myself up as knowing that much about Stalin and the Soviet Union.

WAYNE WHITE
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Syria Analyst
Washington DC (1979-1986)

Mr. White was born and raised in Pennsylvania and educated at Penn State, Abington. Entering the Foreign Service in 1973 he served in Nigeria and Haiti before being assigned to the Sinai Field Mission. He subsequently devoted his career in the State Department to Middle Eastern Affairs, serving in senior positions in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research dealing with Arab-Israel, North African and general Arab and Iranian Affairs. Mr. White was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.

Q: Okay so we will pick it up at that time and start going through the whole thing. Today is 26 May 2005. Wayne, once again, obviously over time responsibilities change, but you did this, when did you start?

WHITE: In November of 1986, I switched from covering Iraq to being Arab-Israeli division deputy chief, Syrian Analyst, and head of the Lebanon crisis team. But as you know from before, an INR team could be hilariously small! I didn't really get out of the Iraq business completely because my replacement as Iraq analyst was a Foreign Service officer in the administrative cone who was extremely nice and very diligent in her own area of specialization, but had virtually no experience with Iraq or as an intelligence analyst coming in. So I was coaching her at least through about the first six months or so, on various things.

Q: Well let's talk about the Lebanon crisis that you dealt with. Then we will move over. What was the Lebanon crisis and what were you all seeing?

WHITE: There was a major dust up in the ongoing and grinding civil war that people had been trying to resolve one way or another since 1976. But it got so dicey that our embassy came under artillery fire. I can remember one of the most poignant meetings I ever had, in this case with Larry Eagleburger when he was Undersecretary for Political Affairs. All concerned were in the room (mainly 6th Floor principals), and I was the senior intelligence briefer. I didn't know whether I was going to be invited to this one final meeting in a series of rather intense gatherings, so I went to the NEA PDAS and told him to slip in INR's view as a favor, which was that we should evacuate the embassy. It had no bomb shelter, and they were getting hit by artillery fire, and if there was a direct hit on the various areas where they had taken refuge above ground, we would have had killed and wounded people. The NEA PDAS said, "No, I'm going to tell Larry what he wants to hear, what a foreign service officer should tell him, which is that the Foreign Service is dangerous sometimes, and we will just have to be prepared to take the hits — even if it means losing people." I thought, Jesus, we're not accomplishing a thing out there. and we should risk people for that?

Fortunately, at the last minute I was invited to the meeting — there had been a communications foul-up. There were about 15 people around a circle with Larry. I briefed the grim details of the situation on the ground, sat down, and Larry said: "I will want your policy opinion, too." Anyhow, I have never seen mind-reading like I saw at that meeting. Larry started on the side

where the NEA PDAS was sitting. He had just begun to say that the embassy people should stick it out before Larry interrupted and said, "Wait a minute. I don't want to hear what you think I want to hear. I want to hear a frank opinion about all this." The PDAS again started saying we should stay because the Foreign Service is supposed to hunker down and do the dangerous jobs, be ready to sacrifice, etc. before Larry said, "That's enough. I get it." Then Larry turned to me, and, mind you, intelligence analysts are not really supposed to be giving policy recommendations, but he said, "What do you think we should do?" I said, "Get out. Get those people out." Everyone else around the room said, "Out, out, out." So we evacuated the embassy. I guess that was about in 1989. I am glad people got out because I have a feeling that we would have had casualties if that decision hadn't been made.

Q: As you looked at it, what was the civil war? Who was fighting whom, and what was it about? What were American interests?

WHITE: The civil war, of course, but the most serious thing we watched as the main American interest was the Syrian presence in central Lebanon, and even toward the south in places. With the Israelis in the south — the extreme south — getting hit by various militias that were beholden to the Syrians and Iranians, it was constantly a flashpoint for a potentially serious Syrian-Israeli confrontation (which had occurred in 1982). That was what we were trying mainly to prevent. The war was simply triggered by a country that fell apart that never should have been assembled in the first place. You had Christian versus Druze, Shia versus Sunni, Palestinian versus Christian—even Shi'a vs. Shi'a. There were just too many sub-conflicts there to sort out easily. The common explanation given by Christian Lebanese was that the Palestinians started the civil war, but that is not entirely true. The Palestinians were just a catalyst for an explosion of some sort that was looming because an increasingly frail old oligarchy simply caving in due to various modern developments. The sad fact was that this probably never would have happened if Lebanon had been left as part of Syria by the French. Or, if the French, despite their zeal to create a large, viable Christian-dominated Lebanese state, had not added to the Christian enclave, which could have functioned as a small, compact country, large areas containing many Shias and Sunnis, that might have been another more enduring solution. Over time, higher Muslim birthrates out-populated the Christians, and then the Sunnis, Shia and Druze began questioning aggressively the Christian control of government.

Q: How did we view what was going on in Syria, Assad?

WHITE: It was a very difficult period in Syria. Assad, shortly after I took over, had a mysterious health crisis. He disappeared from view for seven weeks. Everyone speculated about it. The best information that we had was that he had gone into insulin shock, and in a very serious way. He had diabetes. When he did emerge, it was clear that he didn't just take a vacation. He had lost about 30 pounds or so. He was quite frail. Even his voice had weakened. There was a period there where we thought Assad would pass away creating the potential for domestic chaos in Syria. It was amusing, at least in one instance during that period, because George Schultz had a meeting with Assad (either in New York or Damascus), sufficiently soon after the health crisis that Assad still looked frail. Assad, like some people, could tell when someone was looking at him while otherwise engaging in conversation to see if something is wrong. Obviously Assad noticed this. When Assad said good-bye to Schultz in the doorway, he shook Schultz's hand so

hard that Schultz actually winced, and he is an ex-Marine. Assad said, “You know, I have my ups and downs, but I have a pact with God,” which made everyone snicker upon hearing this because, of course, he wasn’t very religious at all. “The pact is that no matter what problems I have, whenever there is a challenge, I will have all my strength.” Meanwhile he is just crunching Schultz’s hand. Obviously, this is the response to looking him over to see if he was still sick and in what way.

Inside Syria there also was a pretty serious economic situation at the time. It was the first time Syria actually considered what people are talking about with respect to reform, liberalization, etc. But Syria weathered that, and vast empires of corruption that dominated Syria beneath Assad among his cronies persisted and exist even today. But again there was overriding concern about an Israeli-Syrian confrontation. In our exchanges with the Israelis, they were terrified about something dubbed “Cold Start” in the late 1980’s. Cold start essentially meant that instead of ponderously massing Syrian forces on the Golan in order to hit the Israelis, which the Israelis would easily detect, the Syrians would instead, with forces already there, suddenly lunge forward on the Golan. They (and we) did quite a lot of analytic work on cold start. It went on for probably nine months or so before being tossed aside as impractical. One of the incidents during the period however, that punctuated Israel’s potential vulnerability to a certain degree, was a Syrian Mig-23 pilot defecting to Israel. I forget the exact motive, frankly. But he went in low. The Israelis didn’t detect him until he was flying along the Galilee inside of Israel and finally, familiar with Syrian air force maps of Israel, located and landed at a small Israeli emergency fighter strip with his intact Mig-23, all of which the Israelis found rather stunning since if he had had bombs, he probably could have made it all the way to at least one major urban center, possibly even Tel Aviv.

Q: What were you getting from the Israelis? Syria was about the only serious force left, with Egypt out of the game, and was Egypt considered really out of the game at this time?

WHITE: Actually, by the early 1980’s, the Israelis were making the case that the Egyptians were preparing at least for the contingency of war. Something that I had done since joining INR, and only gave up when I left this phase of my career and became a supervisor, was INR’s representative to the “Olive Harvest” Program. Olive Harvest was a program in which U-2’s would fly over the Sinai and over the Golan and then we would generate a cabled readout from the U-2 film for both parties. NPIC (the National Photographic Intelligence Organization — now NIMA) produced a narrative. They would read out what they saw on the ground because there were certain permissible numbers of tanks and artillery within certain zones in the Golan and the Sinai, looking for violations. We would then give those cables (and the film) to the parties in order to show them our analysis was genuine. Our readouts didn’t pull any punches.

The Egyptians in zone A of the Sinai, which is the one third of the Sinai closest to the Suez Canal, were busily building all kinds of fortifications, bunkers, reinforced headquarters etc., and the Israelis raised the issue: isn’t this a violation of the agreement because it appeared to say that there should be a limit on fortifications and installations, appropriate for only one large Egyptian infantry division (mechanized, I believe). So it started a major brouhaha in the late 1980’s requiring the intelligence community to get involved, employing both the lawyers at the State Dept. and the community’s analysts. Legal interviewed people who participated in the drafting of

the original agreements, which is how you determine what the original intents of such an agreement. You are not going to believe what they came up with. There was a comma at a spot in the language concerning fortifications and installations. State's Office of Legal Affairs came out with an opinion stating that fortifications were not limited, only installations, which seemed like a complete reversal of what the intent of the treaty would have been. Who cares about installations — the fortifications were the main issue. Anyway, the Israelis really hit the roof over this, implying that the Egyptians could build all the fortifications they wanted in Zone A. Installations are like water tanks, a parking lot, etc., not command bunkers. It became known as the "great comma" affair. Since then or even I should say probably by the early 90's, the Egyptians had completed sufficient bunkering facilities and artillery drive through positions etc. (all fortifications) for the movement of three army corps forward into zone A of the Sinai to hunker down and hold that area of Sinai in case of war, which is quite astounding because they were, as I said before, only allowed to have infrastructure for one reinforced division in that area. Instead, they were preparing for the presence of perhaps 8 or 9 divisions.

Q: Well having also been an enlisted man for four years, it sounds like something you do to keep your troops busy.

WHITE: Well they were keeping the troops busy, but these things were elaborate. These were really good fortifications. There were massive corps headquarters that were deeply embedded in the earth with all kinds of concrete cubicles and ceilings covered with earth.

Q: Was there analysis of what was this? Was this a lack of trust? I mean had trust deteriorated at that point?

WHITE: Trust had deteriorated to some degree. The bloom was off the rose of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Many of the promised economic dividends of the Camp David Accords never really panned out. With various Israeli-related crises involving the Arab world on which Egypt had to take positions, like Lebanon, the Palestinian issue, etc, it became what the Israelis called a "cold peace." But I think the Egyptians were very defensive in their thinking. They learned their lesson at the canal in 1973 when they lunged across and hunkered down into defensive positions. The Israelis hit them, and they badly beat up the Israelis in a defensive battle. Then they decided to lunge forward themselves, in violation of the original plan, because the desperate Syrians on the Golan front asked for a diversionary attack. Only when they made this move did they get creamed by the Israelis. So they probably just wanted to hunker down in the event of a serious crisis and wouldn't be going anywhere.

Q: What were we figuring on Syria at the time? What was Syria up to?

WHITE: Well, Syria at the time wanted to reinforce its vast military arsenal, in order to sustain some measure of "strategic parity" with Israel — at least a credible threat. It was buying some new systems. This was a major issue for the United States and Israel at the time. We argued that the Syrians, despite a few new purchases, were really having money problems, could not substantially modernize their large military, and could never really achieve anything close to parity. They had too much old equipment and were quite unable to take on Israel, either in Lebanon or on the Golan front. The Israelis of course argued the other side. I was at this time the

INR representative to something called the Joint Political-Military Group meetings (JPMG) in which the State Department Assistant Secretary for Political Military Affairs would lead a delegation to Israel once per year and Israel's defense ministry director general would return the favor, leading a delegation here. It would start with a briefing, and I was the U.S. briefer. There would be an Israeli briefer as well. Sometimes the difference between the two briefings was considerable enough to start a lot of debate right off the bat.

Q: Were the Soviets pumping a lot of stuff into the Arab world? I mean you mentioned the Mig-23 which is a fast plane. It seems like the training and equipment on the planes the Israelis seemed to be able to knock the Syrian planes out of the sky at will.

WHITE: Yes, they proved that, and during this period the Syrians were getting Mig-29's, which were more advanced, but they still didn't match up to the Israeli-piloted aircraft, and most of their air force was still made up of aircraft inferior to the Mig-29. But there was a problem between Syria and the Soviet Union at this time. Syria was broke, and the Soviets were angry over past purchases that hadn't been paid for, let alone giving them still more stuff on credit. The Soviets had become much more budget-oriented, so there was only a trickle of new systems coming in at times. The thing that most aggravated the Israelis was when the Russians gave the Syrians a long range missile system, the SA-5. The missile system was originally designed back in the early 60's to be placed in the northern Soviet Union facing the Arctic Circle with the objective of bringing down nuclear-capable B-52's 150 to 200 miles beyond Soviet airspace. The Syrians had several sites adjacent to the northern Lebanese-Syrian border. The thing that goosed the Israelis terribly was not so much that this obsolescent system could shoot down a combat plane, but rather that it had tremendous range, and if the Syrians uncorked one of these things in the direction of Lod Airport in Israel it could hit a jumbo jet landing or taking off from there. It could also bring down slower military aircraft such as AWAC's deep in the Israeli rear. But, despite all this, the Syrians were in a defensive mode. They weren't looking for a fight at the time.

Q: What was happening internally? What was the problem with the Syrian economy?

WHITE: The problem with the Syrian economy was that first it was dysfunctional, a socialist relic that never really gained any steam. The other problem with the economy was corruption. Assad himself wasn't involved all that much. He lived in a modest apartment. But those people around him were running the equivalent of a kleptocracy in which various corruption empires flourished. Assad's brother, the defense minister, and various other regime big-shots had huge financial and smuggling empires, skimming off of contracts, customs fees, etc. The place was an unmade bed economically.

Q: Were we looking at possible coups, civil unrest or anything like that in Syria?

WHITE: Not really. After the destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood and the horrendous Hama uprising in 1982, we were astonished at the extent to which the Muslim Brotherhood challenge faded. They put practically all of their fighters into Hama and allowed them to be surrounded and destroyed. I covered the Hama uprising (when I was Iraq Analyst, I was the backup analyst for Ba'thist Syria) and learned a lesson which was that if you look straight down on a city that might

be very badly damaged, involving house to house fighting, direct tank fire into bottom floors, etc., you might not see it very easily. Most roofs are intact, but much below rooftop level is gutted. A lot of the damage in Fallujah in Nov. 2004 was of this nature. Speaking of Fallujah, it might have been worthwhile, despite the damage, if 90% of all the Iraqi insurgents had holed themselves up in there and were also destroyed in one fell swoop. But large numbers either never went there to fight or slipped away. That said, I think the Iraq insurgency is much larger than what the Muslim Brotherhood could field in Syria, so that probably wouldn't have worked nearly as well as Assad's bloody victory at Hama.

Q: What were we looking at for a replacement for Assad, and what would be the consequences as we saw them?

WHITE: Well, we saw something developing that would eventually collapse, spawning potential instability. We saw Assad carefully grooming his son, Basil to become the next Hafez al-Assad. That grooming started in the 80's. Basil started as an officer in the Republican Guard. He was given military training and other things he would need to rule the country. That was the track Assad was on, and one in fact that intensified after his health crisis. In the 1990's, far beyond the period we are discussing, Basil would die in a car accident. Assad would have to reach out to his other son, a young ophthalmologist in London, and bring him back and make him the designated successor, which has worked in a more iffy fashion. People are always writing about whether Bashar al-Assad is in charge or whether the other oligarchs, powerful empire builders around him, are in fact running the show now. I think it is a mix of both.

Q: Was this, Assad's role centered on, let me get the right name, Alawi Tribe or was it broader than that?

WHITE: Yes, the Alawis, a rather bizarre Muslim offshoot, were his base. But he recognized that he could not rule that narrowly, and reached out to the majority Sunni Arab power centers in Syria. I had many discussions when I was in Damascus on some business, with Sunnis — especially members of the Sunni merchant, professional and governmental classes in Damascus, who had, effectively, bought in. I think the fact that Bashar with his iffy credentials taking over after Assad's death almost seamlessly indicated that his father had successfully brought much of Syria's Sunni elite into the regime's mainstream. He gave them access to those huge empires of corruption, and even brought others into leading positions in his central government. At one point, perhaps the third or fourth most powerful man in Syria, now former Vice-President Khaddam, was Sunni. There simply weren't enough Alawis to go around, so Assad had to reach out to the Sunnis, and he did that quite successfully. The only Sunni Arab challenge was the Muslim Brotherhood, and it was crushed. They were crushed largely by elite units that were heavily Alawi, but there were Sunnis in them too.

Q: How did you find reporting from our embassy in Damascus and sort of the relations with the desk, because I know at one time, the name escapes me, Bob and I forget his last name, got into a difficulty with George Schultz. Do you remember the Ambassador?

WHITE: No, I don't. When I was working Syria, the two ambassadors there were Bill Eagleton and Ed Djerejian. I had had very good relations with both. Bill was a friend from my work on the

Iraq side of the house, and Ed and I got to know each other very well and just got along famously from the start. Ed and I had a lot of fun. Every time I visited Damascus on TDY and came calling at his office for the first time, we had a standard gag routine. I would start calling him “Your Imperial Highness” and he would ask me not to soil his office carpet by rolling around on it in mock submission — great sense of humor.

Anyway, I wrote an INR paper at the time dealing with a host of these Syrian internal economic — and related political — problems with a lot of analytic angles. It was an IRR, as we referred to a special category of longer INR analyses called Intelligence Research Reports. This is something an analyst could take anywhere from two weeks to several months to research and draft. A copy of this Syrian one went off to Embassy Damascus, but I never heard anything. I thought, gee Ed, I did all this work and you weren’t even interested. Why didn’t I hear anything? Anyhow, in the course of business, I passed through Damascus once again. Ed asked me to come into the embassy conference room, and everyone was there from the mission, the Econ officer, Political officer, the DCM, and other key members of the “Country Team,” such as our Military Attache. Anyway, Ed pulled out copies of my paper and hands them all around. He said, “All these months I have been taking little nuggets out of your paper at staff meetings and tossing them out for discussion.” They all thought it was coming from me, but was all coming from this thing. Now I am letting them know where it all came from, they can all have copies, and we can discuss things more generally.

I thought the reporting was very high quality. There was one juncture though, which was very instructional. I believe it was mid-December 1987. Reporting came in from various sides of the house, mutually supporting, that Assad had decided to take action that could destabilize his entire government. This threw everyone into a panic because doing this would have been suicidal. He might not survive this kind of thing. Even if he succeeded it could cause destabilization. Everyone had to write it up in some form. Schultz wanted INR to do something with it. CIA concluded that the reporting was all bad. Since this was clearly way out of character, and he is a cold, calculating ruler with a lot of insight, this was all bogus reporting. I thought the reporting was so consistent from several sources that it couldn’t be bogus. So I sent quite a different take up to Schultz. I said, “It is all true,” but what had happened was that somebody who was close to Assad simply heard of a temper tantrum. Twenty minutes later it probably meant nothing. It was just like somebody says, “I’m going to kill that guy.” Of course you are not going to kill a friend, coworker, the plumber or whomever. It just means you are really angry at a certain point in time. So Schultz was told: “It is true, he said it, but it means nothing, and don’t worry.” And nothing ever happened. But it is funny how there are times when you wish you hadn’t seen any intelligence in the first place.

Q: No I mean this...

WHITE: That kind of thing causes misplaced concern, panic, etc.

Q: It causes a panic but then there is always the problem of someone saying “Won’t somebody rid me of this meddlesome priest,” And all of a sudden all hell breaks loose

WHITE: But it is interesting to what degree intelligence analysis has to start with a dose of good old common sense. You've got to focus on the leadership, its center of gravity, and the psychology of it all. To the best of your ability, you must try to put yourself in their shoes. There is simply not enough who can really do that sort of thing. Make the person you are evaluating human. Many analysts, especially the young, entry-level ones thought they were doing that, but primarily were just looking at the reporting. I was putting a lot of effort into trying to get deeper into a personality, despite having less time for such things in an understaffed INR — it just meant longer hours.

Q: How did you find the use of INR reports you gave an analyses, not reports but analyses? In NEA did you get a feel that people listened more to what we were talking about because of the complications of NEA as compared to analysts from Asia or European or African affairs?

WHITE: No, I am sorry Stu. I have never really done that kind of comparison. But there is another kind of comparison I referred to earlier when I said we found out that many in the regional bureaus wished that INR would go away so they could send up their own unchallenged advice to the seventh floor. On the Syrian issue at this time, NEA was less receptive to what we were saying than the embassy was. Ed Djerejian and Bill Eagleton knew me, had faith in me, and were very interested in the analysis, and would send in requests personally. NEA would get copies of whatever I sent out, but I got the impression, especially during NEA Asst. Sec. Kelly's tenure, that they were less interested, especially Kelly himself. The seventh floor was more receptive. Because I was involved with the JPMG, which was led by the assistant secretary for political and military affairs, I had a very personal relationship with PM assistant secretaries at that time. They were quite receptive.

Q: I want to come to the Arab Israeli thing in a minute, but first on the Syrian thing. How was Syria during the time you were dealing with relating or lack thereof to Iraq?

WHITE: Oh that is an interesting area.

Q: And Iran

WHITE: Iraq and Syria make for a terrific comparison, not only because they were both Ba'th Party states, but also because they were dominated by minorities. At that time in fact, I compared them in a paper (another IIR) entitled "Iraq and Syria: Ba'thism Beleaguered," most of which I believe was declassified shortly before I left government. Saddam was still mired in his war with Iran, and Assad had his health crises, dysfunctional government, and a struggling economy. Yesterday at MEI, somebody from an agency I won't identify working on a major paper wanted to interview me on this very subject, comparing the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th parties, although your question went farther. There are dramatic differences. Iraqi Ba'thism was similar to Stalinism, with its intense internal controls, purges, sheer brutality on a larger scale, etc. Iraqis are very disciplined by nature, and Saddam was a real brute. It was a heavily-controlled operation and truly what was called in the title of a book, a "Republic of Fear." Syria was much different. Since I spent so much time in Iraq, I noticed the difference immediately — on my first visit to Syria in 1985. It was what I called Levantine Ba'thism. This was an authoritarian state, but with less of that almost obsessive control found in Iraq.

Q: You are making a slugging gesture.

WHITE: That gesture probably related to Iraq's hard-edged style of Ba'thism. I don't want to say it was (or is) anything goes in Syria, but there wasn't this incredible hands-on, in your face control where you would see the faces of officials you know go white in a meeting if somebody said something that was only slightly critical of the government. There always seemed to be, in Iraq, somebody in the room that would get back to one of the intelligence services or the Ba'th Party with any derogatory information, and the individual involved would be picked up and killed or imprisoned. Syria was much different.

I will just illustrate this with one interesting anecdote. I was in Syria on one of my TDY's there, and had lunch at the DCM's residence with a former Syrian major general who now served in the Syrian foreign ministry as their head of something a bit similar to INR. He didn't have what we had in the way of resources, to say the least. He only had a staff of about 20 people. He fed off of a lot of press reports and a few little bits of intelligence that he could glean from Syrian intelligence which usually held things close to the chest and wouldn't disseminate. He was interested in how he could make his operation more relevant, like INR. We actually sent him a brochure on INR. This was a nice little guidebook INR did under Hugh Montgomery in the early 1980's on what products we generate, what kind of work we do otherwise, etc. We gave him this unclassified brochure so he could do his little thing in the Syrian foreign ministry a tad better and especially so the embassy could have improved contact with him. In the midst of the lunch he just came out and said: "You know, I am a Sunni, not an Alawite. Those Alawites are weird. I don't understand what they believe." The Alawite sect is indeed pretty strange. Anyway, he said to me and David Ransom, our DCM, "Could either of you get me a book that has been published in Lebanon about the Alawites so I can pass it around, and we can find out about them?" This would have been unheard of in Iraq. You go into an office and you can have a fairly informative discussion with a Syrian official, at any level. They were much more open than their Iraqi counterparts.

Q: Was there any collusion or ties with Iran during the Iran Iraq war?

WHITE: Absolutely. There was a deep hatred between the two regimes.

Q: You were saying?

WHITE: Yes, all the way to the end of the war there was an air bridge between Damascus International Airport and Mehrabad Airport (outside Tehran) in Iran. High value military cargoes that couldn't wait for shipment, often from Europe or the Far East, would fly the hump, skirting Iraq and moving over Turkey into Iran. Many people tried to stop this from happening by getting the Turks to try to block the flights. The Turks didn't want to get involved, so they just let it continue. But, yes, Syria was an active supporter of Iran. The only other country in the Arab world with a similar orientation was Libya; Qadhafi supported Iran for various bizarre reasons, but not to the extent Syria did. In any case, it kept going on and on. The Iraqis only tried to interfere with that air bridge once. You would think, as an Iraqi, "Let's pick off one of these

jumbo jets full of high tech parts for Iranians,” and they did — once. In 1982, the Iraqis lunged into that stream and pickled one plane. It is amazing how bad your luck can be at certain times.

Q: When you say pickled a plane what do you mean?

WHITE: Sent an air to air missile right up its tailpipe and blew it up. This is a military expression I picked up from those CENTCOM people I used to travel with so much. But of all the planes to nail going between Damascus and Tehran, they destroyed an executive jet, not a cargo plane, containing the Algerian foreign minister conducting shuttle diplomacy in an effort to produce truce in the Iran-Iraq War. Of all planes to hit, I mean it was probably a one in a thousand mistake. After that the Iraqis just forgot about doing anything about the Syrian-Iranian air bridge. And, yes, things like the air bridge just increased the bitterness between Assad and Saddam.

You know we talk about these two countries as being both Ba’th party regimes as if they have (or had) something very much in common. We have already talked about the different nature of the regimes, but essentially both maintained distinct identities. The Ba’th Party itself by the late 1980’s played very little role in actual governance in either country. Both men felt they could only trust their family and a relatively small circle of longstanding cronies. Therefore, in order to bolster their rule, they put all the emphasis on those people, elite army units, intelligence services, etc. The Ba’th Party was used as a legitimizing rubber stamp for important state decisions. When you wanted to embark on a major new initiative, you would call Ba’th Party leaders together. I used to liken it to how Roman emperors from the first Century AD all the way to the end of the empire would constantly invoke the “Senate and People of Rome” (SPQR) as being the source of their legitimacy and power, when the senate and people of Rome had virtually no power at all. That is about where the Ba’th Party stood. We knew there was going to be a major change in policy when Assad or somebody would call a Baath Party conclave. It just meant he had made a decision and he wanted to announce it, wrapped in Ba’thist legitimacy.

Q: Did the oil situation raise its head for your point of view.

WHITE: Yes, Syria allowed an Iraqi pipeline to pass through initially back in the 70’s, and then cut it off rather quickly over pricing disputes in the mid-70’s, only reinforced when the two regimes had a big snit in 1979 when Saddam took over from Hassan al-Bakr, his sort of co-ruler. Bakr was shoved aside relatively gently as being in bad health (a lie). The way Saddam consolidated after that was by accusing a number of members of the Iraqi leadership of being part of a Syrian plot against the Iraqi government, a plot which never existed. It was like Stalin’s purges of the 1930’s ending in the early 1950’s amidst the “Doctor’s Plot,” only because of Stalin’s death. Saddam singled out various members of the Iraqi cabinet and Ba’th leadership that might challenge him in the future because of sympathy with Bakr’s desire to reduce tensions with Syria, and had them executed with the entire surviving leadership present so they also would have “blood on their hands.” That just did it because Assad had no plot going, and cut off all ties with Baghdad. Then, in 1982, in order to make money and indicate he wasn’t entirely siding with Iran in the war, Assad reopened the pipeline again. Then the Hama uprising, which we discussed earlier, exploded. When Assad crushed the uprising in Hama, he apparently found some bits of evidence that the Iraqis had been supporting the Muslim Brothers. We assessed that

the connection between Iraq and the Muslim Brothers was marginal. The Muslim Brothers were an indigenous and very powerful organization. They didn't need all that much external support. Whatever was really true, that did it. Assad shut the pipeline all over again, after being open only a few months, and it remained shut for the rest of the Iran-Iraq war.

Q: From our point of view, how did Syria stand regarding aid and comfort to terrorists during that time?

WHITE: They were in it up to their eyeballs supporting primarily Palestinian terrorist groups. There was even a group that broke off from Arafat that tried, with Syrian encouragement, to be an alternative PLO. In Syrian eyes, Arafat had become too moderate. They also helped Iran support Hezbollah, even giving them a major base on the road between Damascus and the Lebanese border, so they were deeply into terrorist activity and backed just about any group hitting the Israelis from the mess that was Lebanon. Among other things, they felt their support for these terrorist groups, all of whom were directed mainly against the Israelis, was a major card in any future negotiations with Israel. In other words: "If you give us the Golan back, we will neuter all of these groups, and you won't have any more problems."

I was at a Middle East conference, chairing a panel of State Department people down in Lexington, Va., about five years ago. The panel did a good job of giving a very frank presentation. They were talking about Syria, Lebanon, things like that. The panelists were mainly at the office director level. And the issue of Syria and terrorism came up. There was a Syrian gentleman, a scholar I suppose, who had come all the way from Damascus for the conference. He stood up to ask one of the last questions. He said, "I don't understand why you continue to talk about," meaning the whole panel, "Syrian terrorism." I have never seen any evidence of terrorism in Syria. My government has never said anything about such terrorism. This is a false claim." I had an opportunity in public to say something I had always wanted to say to people like that. I said: "I understand exactly what you are talking about. You are right in everything you say about not seeing or hearing anything. But any government involved in terrorism, involved in extremely damaging and bloody operations, is not going to publish it in the newspaper, and is not going to inform its own citizens about such dirty tricks. But, BELIEVE ME, your government is deeply involved in terrorism, and it is no surprise that you would be the last to know about it." He sat down; his face was ashen. It suddenly dawned on him: "Dear God, why would they tell me? They would hide it." A lot of others in the audience were laughing — or nodding seriously — by the end of my response.

Q: Did we have any cards to play with Syria?

WHITE: Just one. We were the only ones who had any influence with Israel. If Syria didn't want a war with Israel, which it did not, we were best positioned to lower the likelihood of something like that happening. The Israelis disagreed with this of course, like I have told you before. We could presumably lean on the Israelis at times of great tension, trouble in southern Lebanon, for example, and pass messages between the two, which we did, selectively. Sometimes there were messages we didn't want to pass, shamelessly self-serving and of no value in any meaningful exchange. But there were sometimes messages that were warnings and very interesting exchanges.

Q: Did we see any realistic solution to the Golan Heights and was that really the issue between Israel and Syria or was it more?

WHITE: It was (and is) very much the Golan. It has always been the Golan. There are other things, but the Golan is 90% of the game. Hafez al-Assad was determined to get the entire Golan back. Being defense minister when the Golan was lost made it a very personal mission to restore it to Syria. In fact there was an Israeli former head of Mossad who became a peacenik. He came visiting me. Long after I left the job of Senior Analyst for Syria and went on to become a division chief for things not involving Israel and Syria, he wanted to come to see me because he had gotten to know me during my official trips to Israel. He said, "I have a Golan peace plan, and I want to run it by you." The Golan peace plan was for the Syrians to get everything back except for a tiny little three or four kilometer strip along the Israeli border, just enough gave the Israelis a hold on the plateau for early warning purposes. It was also a nice little defensive feature. I said, "It won't work. They want the whole thing." He went public with his plan anyway, and it was just slapped down by the Syrians. They were determined to get everything back or remain in a state of war with Israel. If they made peace without getting it all back, much of the regime's propaganda about why it needed to have a large army, why it needed to have security, why it needed to divert resources away from desperately needed public projects and such would go up in smoke. Frankly, I think Assad was content not to get the Golan back, if necessary, because of all the problems it might cause, as consequences of peace, with Syria being in serious economic shape. These problems would become dramatically more apparent in the wake of peace between Israel and Syria.

Q: Did we see Syria as being a viable country and even a flourishing one if it got rid of its lousy political structure?

WHITE: Not really. The socialist economy and widespread corruption would have been very difficult to turn around.

Q: All right, end with peace. In other words, you know just looking at it, it looks like Syria could be quite a productive country.

WHITE: One major problem was that she relies, in part, on oil exports, and she has relatively low production figures and very low grade crude that only a few refineries in the Mediterranean process; it is so bad that it has a very high percentage of unwanted refining byproducts, and much of it is used for asphalt. So a lot of Syrian crude has paved roads in Italy. They only produce 4-5 hundred thousand barrels a day, and declining, which wasn't nearly sufficient. But with this faltering economy, and with a military badly in need of upgrades, the Israelis kept flagging the threat. In an amusing aside here, I had a meeting with an Israeli member of their military intelligence in the huge defense ministry complex in Tel Aviv. This is about '88-'89. The major involved would later go on to be head of assessments for DMI (Israeli Military Intelligence). It was him, me, and an Israeli reserve captain, an economist, sitting next to him. The major, who would later rise rapidly, couldn't see the Israeli officer sitting next to him at the table and what that guy was doing. The major was trying to give me the pitch about how great Syria was doing (pumping it up as a threat), and there were five or six times when I disagreed

with him strongly. Before I even said anything, each time the major made what I thought was an especially exaggerated comment about Syria's strength, the captain next to him would shake his head side to side, indicating that he didn't agree at all. This is so Israeli. They are so individually precocious that while one Israeli is giving me the party line, the guy next to him is shaking his head side to side signaling that a lot of people at the Ministry of Defense don't believe the party line.

Q: We talked about oil, but what about water? How did water play in Syria at the time?

WHITE: Water shortages have been a real problem, one that is increasing. One main issue was the Assad Dam on the Euphrates. Turkey embarked on a vast development project to try to stabilize an unruly southeast Turkey by building massive dams and it was choking off the flow south, and really creating a significant shortfall of water down the line, especially while the dams were filling. We have gotten through that patch now, and I think that is pretty much over, but Damascus itself drew its water from other sources, and they have been increasingly troubled as well. You know, I think the most tragic water issue, which nobody ever talks about, is what was not done because of the long Syrian-Israeli-Jordanian face-off. Along the Syrian border with Jordan runs the Yarmuk River, which feeds into the Jordan. In winter, the flow from the Yarmuk can be quite considerable. But much of it runs down into the Jordan and then just sweeps into the Dead Sea and is lost. People since the 1950's have wanted to put a dam on the Yarmuk to catch that winter flow and then, using controlled releases into the Jordan, feed major Jordanian and Israeli needs. But with the tensions in the region, and with the Israelis saying they would attack the dam if it was built, the Yarmuk dam project, surveyed by USAID in the 1950's, just never happened. So, economic development in Israel and Jordan has been seriously hampered as a result of this continuing mess. There are many examples of where the Romans and people like the Nabateans before them were controlling water and using it more efficiently than the modern states that are there now, which is a pretty sad situation.

DAVID L. MACK

**Director: Office of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq Affairs
Washington, DC (1982-1985)**

Ambassador Mack was born and raised in Oregon and educated at Harvard University. Joining the Foreign State Department in 1965, he studied Arabic and devoted his career dealing with Arab and Middle East issues. His foreign posts include Baghdad, Amman, Jerusalem, Beirut, Tripoli, Benghazi and Tunis. From 1986 to 1989 he served as U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. In Washington from 1990 to 1993, he was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs. During this period, the major issue was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the military actions that followed. Ambassador Mack was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1995.

MACK: Yes, Habib had many of the best American virtues. Of course, things happened in a Lebanese way. Bashir Gemayel was killed. That upset a lot of plans. In the end his brother was

selected as president of Lebanon, but his brother was a very different kind of person who didn't have the same kind of support from across the border in Israel or from the Maronite community. Amin was more of a conciliator with other groups, but he lacked leadership charisma. He's somebody that I had met when I made my trip out to Lebanon back in the mid-1970s. After Amin's election, Lebanese factional politics reasserted itself. Meanwhile the Israelis began to dig in or to get bogged down, and the Syrians were certainly dug in.

The Syrian army had been devastated in the Israeli invasion. But one of the things that Habib understood was that we didn't have all that long before the Syrians would rebuild themselves. I think they rebuilt themselves even faster than Phil envisaged, and they managed with Soviet help to restore their military strength. Habib had told us we had to meet the U.S. objectives for the second military deployment by the end of the year. By the end of the year, it was no longer so easy to deal with the Syrians. I think it was true in the beginning of September that, if the Israelis had been prepared to leave a messy situation in Beirut and a messy situation in Lebanon and take their chances on this untried shaky central Lebanese government, then you could have gotten a reciprocal Syrian withdrawal as the Israelis left. This is because the Syrians were very weak at first. Their military was weak, and probably a lot of Syrians didn't want any more to do with Lebanon. As it happened, the Israelis started off by being very stiff, unwilling to give an inch to the Lebanese, as we were urging, unwilling to even start their withdrawal. Then, when both the Israelis and we started taking casualties, the Israelis pulled back rather quickly to more militarily defensible positions outside greater Beirut and dug in. When the Israelis did that, it was a clear sign to the Syrians that all they had to do was take a deep breath and wait. The Syrians believed they would be able to wait this situation out.

Meanwhile negotiations had gotten underway secretly between some Israelis and supposed unofficial emissaries of President Amin Gemayel. I had a foretaste of Israeli views when Morrie Draper and I went up to New York in October 1982 to meet with Yitzhak Shamir. He was Israel's new foreign minister and may have had the title of deputy prime minister. Shamir was later to come to Washington to meet with higher level Americans, but Morrie and I had the assignment of getting a feel what the Israelis were going to brief us on, the position they would take in their negotiations with the Lebanese. I had assumed they were going to want to leave fairly promptly, provided that they got some cooperation from the Lebanese on security measures in southern Lebanon and provided the Syrians also withdrew forces from Lebanon. I wasn't prepared at all for Israeli negotiating tactics. It may have only been an opening position, but I was astonished at how rigid it was. Shamir conveyed to us that Israel was in no hurry. The Israelis obviously were looking forward to a prolonged, getting to know you negotiating process with the Lebanese. Our understanding of the position of Gemayel and other senior Lebanese was that they were hoping for brief face to face meetings and a quick resolution of the issue of Israeli withdrawal.

Morrie saw more openings in Shamir's position than I did. Along with Phil Habib, he had been dealing with the Israelis. I did not see the signals of Israeli flexibility that Morrie did, so I came back to Washington feeling pretty depressed.

Phil had told NEA how he envisaged the negotiations, involving Lebanon and Israel directly and Lebanon also reaching an understanding with the Syrians. Phil had clear ideas about what

somebody was going to have to tell the Israelis in order to reinforce Lebanon's requirements for sovereignty up to the border. In retrospect, I don't think anybody ever told them. I remember hearing George Shultz quoted as saying the Israelis want to have this negotiation for its own sake. They don't want to just present their position and broker a deal with the Lebanese, so the Lebanese could have an Israeli withdrawal like a miraculous virgin birth. The Israelis wanted to have this prolonged negotiation leading up to an agreement, rather than an agreement being brokered by us, and then the sides meeting and signing it. I wasn't there when he said it, but I heard George Shultz being quoted as saying, "how can the U.S. government oppose negotiations between Israel and one of its neighbors?" I was only then becoming aware of the magic that Shultz ascribed to the process of negotiations, sitting down face to face. In the end, the negotiations took longer than anybody, probably including the Israelis, had imagined. They were drawn out and increasingly bitter. The negotiations left an extremely bad taste with the Lebanese. Rather than gaining more trust in the Israelis, the Lebanese came to have less. That was also true for the Israelis. The Israelis had trusted Bashir, but they didn't trust Amin. They certainly didn't trust Amin's negotiators.

The formal negotiations took place in a hotel at Khaldeh, just south of Beirut. I was there for the final negotiating session. The Israeli side was headed by former Mossad chief David Kimche and the Lebanese side by a senior Lebanese diplomat. The latter was a Muslim, partly intended by the Lebanese to signal that any agreement would commit the whole government, not just the Maronite president. Both delegations had skillful leaders and other highly qualified members with expertise ranging from military matters to legal procedures. The U.S. also had a delegation at the table. Although we were more a witness to the agreement than a party, the Lebanese in particular wanted us there. The atmosphere was businesslike and marked by mutual courtesy, but it was far from cordial.

It was apparent in the negotiations and otherwise that the Israelis were rapidly losing their confidence that this Lebanese central government could be an effective force down in the south. And it was kind of hard to figure out how they could. In my inter-agency functions I was meeting with groups, often as their chairman, trying to come up with ways of rebuilding the Lebanese army, and the assistance that we would provide. That became yet another mission for our forces over there. At this time they were ensconced at the Beirut airport, but another mission that our forces were going to do was training. This was going to be perhaps the principal way we were going to help reconstitute the Lebanese central authorities.

Eventually, Israel and Lebanon reached an agreement at the Khaldeh negotiations on May 17, 1983, but not before a terrible tragedy for our embassy. If I'm not mistaken, the car bombing of our lightly protected embassy in Beirut took place on April 16. Over 30 Americans and Lebanese were killed. I knew several of the Americans. Most of them were people associated with another agency, and they included Bob Ames, the National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East. A number of Lebanese were in the visa office at the time waiting for visas, and two U.S. Marine guards died. Many more Americans and Lebanese were injured. The embassy staff regrouped not too far away at the British embassy. The British had very generously loaned us a floor of the building where they had their embassy. A unit of U.S. forces moved in from their base at Beirut Airport to protect the British embassy. The effect of that car bomb was a fore taste of how dangerous things could get for U.S. diplomats overseas, since previous lethal violence tended to

be targeted at specific high profile individuals. The bombing also led to far reaching changes in the protection we require for U.S. embassy buildings.

Q: During this time were you getting a feel from either our embassy or other about the change in the Shiite perspective?

MACK: In the wake of the Sabra-Shatila massacre and the embassy bombing we became more conscious of attitudes among the Lebanese Shiites. The press talked about the Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps, but I think the greatest number of people killed were Lebanese Shiites from the south. They had been displaced by fighting during the Israeli invasion and had not been accommodated elsewhere by the Lebanese government. The embassy had already been doing some very good reporting on the degree to which the Shiite Lebanese were being radicalized, but the rest of the U.S. government had probably not paid it enough attention. The radicalization of Lebanese Shiites was happening throughout this period. The way in which this was providing openings for Iranian revolutionary guards and other hostile elements only became apparent gradually.

Q: Were we seeing these as reflections of Iranians more than maybe we should? I mean, were Iranians sort of the devils?

MACK: Washington did not yet see Iran as the primary source of problems for Lebanon. For some in the U.S. government at that time, the devil was Syria. George Shultz, for all I admired him, was not by any means perfect. Shultz had decided that Syria was the problem preventing an agreement between Lebanon and Israel and Lebanese progress toward full sovereignty. In this respect, he had an attitude close to the Israelis and different from that of Habib. In bilateral talks with the Israelis about the negotiations, Habib would say, "Well, do you think the Syrians will accept this?" And the Israelis would say, "Don't talk to us about the Syrians, we're negotiating with the Lebanese. If the Lebanese can buy this, it's their problem to square it with the Syrians." Then we would ask President Gemayel whether he was briefing the Syrians, and Amin would assure us that he was. Unfortunately, Habib could speak forthrightly to both Lebanese and Israeli leaders, but he did not have a good relationship with the Syrians.

Q: Did we have relations with Syria?

MACK: We had full diplomatic relations with Syria, but the dialogue was not a very open one. Our ambassador, Bob Paganelli, felt sidelined and ignored by Washington, and he did not have much of a relationship with President Hafez al-Asad. He and other U.S. diplomats in Damascus talked with other Syrian officials, however, and they discussed events in Lebanon. Throughout this period, Paganelli was sending in reports indicating that the Syrians were not going to go along with what people thought they would accept. At the State Department, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research did good work based on what embassy Damascus had reported, along with other sources of information about Syrian attitudes toward Lebanon. These views did not seem to have any credibility with the decision-makers in Washington.

Q: I've heard reports about a meeting, maybe you were there.

You might mention the chiefs of mission meeting.

MACK: At some point after Shultz became Secretary, he met with NEA ambassadors. I heard second hand that there had been a lot of grumbling at this chiefs of mission meeting, but the only person who spoke up really forthrightly to the Secretary against what the U.S. was trying to do was Bob Paganelli. Reportedly, he spoke very intemperately, which sounds like Paganelli, and that Shultz did not appreciate it.

Paganelli was a capable and very intelligent area specialist but a terrible bureaucrat. He had a way of making everybody angry. As a result, he wasn't as effective as he could have been, but he certainly had some correct insights. Unfortunately, he was sometimes the only channel for important but unwelcome news about Syria. Phil Habib had not been trusted by the Syrians for some time, and it went back to a diplomatic role he played as special envoy to the region in 1979. Habib had conveyed Israeli assurances to Damascus regarding the situation in southern Lebanon. As a result, the Syrians pressured Palestinian groups to reduce attacks across Israel's northern border. When Israel invaded in 1982, the Syrians felt they were in effect betrayed. Asad was surprised by the Israeli invasion, in good part because he relied on the Israeli cease fire commitments that Syria had received through Habib. Habib was deceived just like the Syrians were, but the Syrians blamed Habib and the U.S. This explains why Phil was not in a position to get directly from Damascus an independent verification of Syrian views. He tended to pay more attention to what his Lebanese interlocutors told him about Syrian views than what Bob Paganelli told him.

Q: I'm told they thought Bob was going to be on his way out, or something like that.

MACK: As it turned out, our embassy in Damascus was right on most of these points. The Syrians were rapidly reasserting themselves as a major factor. The tendency on the part of people in Washington was to believe that the Syrians were the ones creating problems for us in Lebanon, rather than the Iranians. Of course, it could well have been both in cooperation. Initially at least, the Iranians couldn't do anything in Lebanon without a certain amount of Syrian acquiescence, or even cooperation. So the issue of whether the Syrians were the primary problem is a little muddled.

Those of us who were close to people in embassy Beirut never believed U.S. military involvement in Lebanon was going to be painless. We knew this intensive involvement was going to be tough, that there would be casualties and that eventually there would be people in the U.S. military who probably would be lost. As long as the negotiations were going on, however, and they lasted up until the middle of April, there seemed to be a very strong rationale for keeping U.S. forces in Lebanon. Our presence was making it possible for us to be a credible interlocutor with both sides. The negotiations were really tri-partite, Israel-U.S.-Lebanon. Many Lebanese felt the U.S. used its presence to pressure the Lebanese side to come to agreements the Israelis had proposed. I think that's unfair, because there was tremendous movement over time in the Israeli position. The Israeli negotiating style was to have an endless series of fall back positions, and their position did evolve a lot over time. By the time an agreement was reached, however, there was not any good feeling between the two sides. The two sides were more embittered at the end of the process of negotiations than they were at the beginning. Certainly the

Lebanese central government was discredited in the eyes of many Lebanese, particularly the Shiites. The Druze, however, and even some of the Maronite factions were extremely critical of the government. It was not going to be easy to sell the agreement to key Lebanese factions, even if the Gemayel government succeeded in getting a positive vote in parliament. Implementing the agreement, which required broad support, was going to be the hard part. In the end, selling the May 17 agreement to the Lebanese factions proved an impossible task.

As acting DCM and then as an aide to Habib, I was involved in the effort of trying to bring various factions aboard. The job of convincing the Syrians was to be done primarily by the other Arabs. There had been discussions throughout this period by Shultz and Habib with the Saudis and other friendly Arab governments. The Secretary and Habib felt they had a commitment from the other Arabs to deliver Syrian acquiescence to implementation of the May 17 agreement.

Three weeks after the April bombing of our embassy, just prior to conclusion of the May 17 agreement, I had gone on TDY to Beirut to replace our DCM to give him a three week leave outside Lebanon. The Department recognized the bombing was extremely traumatic for the people involved. Even for the survivors who were not badly injured physically, it was psychologically very traumatic. The Department and Ambassador Dillon had agreed that all embassy personnel needed to take a breather outside Lebanon reasonably soon after the bombing.

Q: Bob Pugh was the DCM.

MACK: Bob Pugh was DCM, and Ryan Crocker was political officer. They had dug bodies out of the embassy wreckage during those terrible days after the bombing. Now they were trying to deal with all the problems that happened, and reconstituting themselves in these temporary quarters in the British embassy. We had agreed that on a staggered basis everybody should have a TDY out of the country. Those who wanted transfers could have them, and a few did take that option. I went over on a TDY basis to replace the DCM. The British provided us an unfurnished floor of their embassy building, and our personnel were using the shabbiest imaginable temporary furniture. What impressed me, and what should impress every FSO, was that they were doing the annual efficiency reports. I thought to myself, "My gosh, people in the Department are typically delaying doing their efficiency reports." Ambassador Bob Dillon, who was a superb leader, knew that one thing that you must do is make certain that people are recognized for what they had done under difficult circumstances. As a result, everybody was working at that, as well as all the other tasks that they had to do. Although I met Beirut staff members who were badly damaged psychologically, and some of them have had serious psychological problems since, group morale was surprisingly high.

While I was in Beirut, the Lebanese and the Israelis concluded the May 17 agreement. While Ambassador Dillon called on most of the senior Lebanese leaders to gain support from the agreement, he assigned me to meet with some of them. Perhaps the most senior of these was Nabih Berri, the head of the Shiite Amal party and militia. There were basically three groups of organized Shiites at this point. There were the old feudal leaders, many of whom had positions in the parliament. Then there was the Amal headed by Nabih Berri, which represented a lot of poor Shiite. We saw Amal as representing the Shiite center, inclined to be moderate. If only people

would give them a chance and a share of power, Amal would give the government and the Israelis a chance, but they were very suspicious of both. Finally, there were nascent groups beginning to form that were more radical, and under Iranian influence. These were forerunners of Hezbollah. We did not pay a lot of attention to them because they didn't seem to have a strong popular mandate. We saw Amal as representing the mass of Shiites who felt they were dispossessed and had been given a raw deal, and by god they were going to demand a new deal, a better deal, in this new Lebanese political system.

In my conversation with Nabih Berri he pointed out chapter and verse in the agreement between the Lebanese and the Israelis which he felt discriminated against them. In particular, he objected to language that propped up the little, mostly Christian militia group down in the south, the so-called South Lebanon Army, which was working closely with the Israelis. This local militia was drawn from a small minority of the population in southern Lebanon. In effect, the Israelis had enlisted them, providing artillery cover and various equipment and intelligence. The Israelis seemed prepared to rely upon the South Lebanon Army, rather than trying to build a bridge to the Shiite Amal militia, which had numerous personnel in southern Lebanon. The Lebanese government negotiators had agreed to curious wording in the May 17 agreement regarding the Lebanese parties responsible for security in the southern regions of Lebanon near the Israeli border. The agreement had been negotiated in English. While there were Arabic and Hebrew translations, the English version was considered authoritative. The agreement said that security would be maintained by the Lebanese armed forces and the Ansar. They used an Arabic term in the authoritative English version which was understood by everybody to be talking about this Christian militia, the South Lebanon Army. Ansar is a term in the Koran. These were the companions of the Prophet, sometimes translated as helpers. But the precise description of who these people were, and the name, South Lebanon Army, had not been used in the agreement. Nabih Berri, however, was under no illusion about who these people were. They were toadies of the Israelis, as far as he was concerned. Berri felt very aggrieved, because he had been perfectly prepared to help the Lebanese central government restore order in southern Lebanon.

That was an example of the kind of problems that existed internally in getting this agreement implemented. Moreover, the Syrians proved unwilling to go along with the agreement as far as their withdrawal was concerned. In the end, the parties never implemented the agreement, and a very difficult summer followed. Among other problems, there were escalating incidents of artillery shells striking the area where our forces were stationed around the airport south of Beirut and near the sea. Meanwhile, I had returned to Washington where I was putting my experience on the scene in Lebanon to work.

Q: Talking about these forces there, we had approximately how many people, and how were they comprised? Were you finding yourself coming up with different rationales?

MACK: Throughout this period, people kept trying to come up with a better rationale for keeping our forces in Lebanon, and even for deploying getting more forces. This was particularly true for Bud McFarlane and others at the White House. There was discussion of putting in a heavy U.S. division, which could sustain itself better and take on a larger mission than the Marine units.

At one point, Bud McFarlane called me to ask that I meet with a new, youngish, military staffer at the National Security Council. This officer [Phil Dur] is still in government and is now a Navy rear admiral. Bud described him as a really bright guy who had lots of ideas and needed someone to educate him about Lebanon. When I heard his ideas, I was alarmed. They involved greater forces, mobility, and deploying our forces up into the mountains. Go south, go east. Push the Israelis out, push the Syrians out. He had very ambitious ideas about expanding U.S. military presence. All I could think of was those Lebanese mountains where you're taking your life in your hands simply to drive over them. The idea of moving our forces out of the airport and up into the mountains struck me as being the wrong thing to be doing with them. Moreover, it was strongly opposed by the Pentagon. Both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary Weinberger's people were focused on getting U.S. forces out of Lebanon, not building them up. On the other hand, there were people in the White House and a few in the State Department saying the problem was not that we had forces there. The problem is that we were not using them well enough, assertively enough, and maybe we needed to apply more force. This was the gist of the inter-agency dialogue. At one point, it must have been August when a lot of people on leave, the young Navy officer from the NSC called me up and said, "The President has an appetite for taking decisions this week, and I'm going to be briefing him. What do you say we brief him on this plan?" I can remember thinking to myself, oh my gosh, if the President has appetite for decisions and the person doing the briefing is this young Navy officer, god only knows what decisions will be taken. I went to Nick Veliotis, or somebody at a higher level, who helped get things calmed down at the NSC. At that point in mid-1983, there was a lot of inter-agency controversy back and forth, thrashing around about what to do in Lebanon. The State Department was on board for keeping forces in Lebanon, perhaps with a training mission, but not for increasing the combat role of the military.

Q: I've heard some corridor rumor, probably more gossip or speculation, that George Shultz's Marineness was coming through. That Marines didn't leave with the job undone.

MACK: Secretary Shultz had confidence in the value of the presence of U.S. Marines in Lebanon. We had justified having the forces there in order to support the negotiations, but now we had to implement the agreement. So the forces were there to support implementation of the agreement, and to continue to support the reestablishment of central Lebanese government institutions. We kept coming back to reestablishing the central institutions, including the Lebanese army.

The Lebanese central government was getting its act in order to a degree, but much more slowly than people might like. When I was over there on TDY and talking to Bob Dillon, the political reasons preventing progress became clearer. Amin Gemayel, the president of Lebanon, did not like Nabih Berri, indeed seemed to resent him. Nabih Berri was low class. Amin was from the aristocrats. He was used to dealing with some of the Shiite feudal aristocrats, but not with somebody like Nabih Berri. Amin sensed, perhaps correctly, that the Shiites were a demographic threat to Maronite dominance. Amin was much more prepared to deal with Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze. Although the Druze were historic rivals of the Maronites and the Jumblatt family had feuded with the Gemayels, Walid was a person from the same kind of social class. Amin Gemayel and Walid Jumblatt were sons of feudal leaders, one Maronite, one Druze. By contrast, Nabih Berri, even with a law degree from the Sorbonne, was a nobody in Lebanon's

traditional order. It became apparent that there were these kinds of reasons why Amin, who could often be a good conciliator, was not prepared to reach out to emerging Shiite leaders. It was as if he saw them as the ultimate threat to Maronite rule in the country. Perhaps Amin was under pressure on this point from other key Maronites. He had a very tenuous grip on Maronite loyalties. Many Maronites distrusted Amin and felt he was too flexible. Not like their great hero, Bashir, his martyred brother.

During this period, NEA succeeded in getting George Shultz to hammer away at the Lebanese government leaders on the need to broaden their political base. They knew what that meant, they didn't like it, and they resisted it very strongly. Basically, the appeal of the Lebanese president and his allies was that the U.S. should put in more force, or use the force that we had effectively to support them, the Maronites who controlled the government.

I empathized a little bit, of course, because Amin and other Maronite leaders had their Orthodox Christian, and Sunni Muslim allies. Amin's government even had support from some of the old, feudal Shiite ministers who basically had cut their connections with the mass of the Shiite population. I don't want to be too critical of Amin Gemayel. As president of Lebanon, he proved to be a man of exceptional courage, but I doubted his political wisdom at various junctures.

The security situation in the Beirut area broke down terribly during September of 1983. In addition to seemingly continuous bombardments of Lebanese government positions, occasional shots were striking the U.S. held zone at the airport. It was hard to tell where firing was coming from. There are grounds to suspect that sometimes Maronite militiamen would lob something in our direction, just to see if we wouldn't shoot back at the Druze up in the mountains, who with Syrian support were doing most of the shelling of the city. It wouldn't have been from the Lebanese armed forces, but from one of the Maronite militia groups. It was a very complicated and confusing situation.

Secretary Shultz was highly engaged on a near daily basis. At his request, for example, I would brief him fairly often in the early morning. He clearly seemed to be focusing more and more on the Syrians as the problem. To me it seemed like the problems were Lebanese problems, and unless the Lebanese solved their internal problems, they would not be able to deal effectively with either the Israelis or the Syrians. In fact, the Lebanese embassy in Washington was not of one view. Ambassador Abdullah Bouhabib, who was a Maronite Christian despite his first name, had a direct channel back to Amin Gemayel. Sometimes, Abdullah expressed one point of view while his DCM, a Shiite Muslim with whom I would occasionally have discreet meetings, took a different position. Ambassador Bouhabib focused in on the need for greater U.S. support for President Gemayel. The DCM wouldn't come in to my office because we didn't want other Lebanese to know he was seeing me, but he and I might get together somewhere else for lunch. He told me that he understood what we were saying about the central government broadening its political base, but this was not what the ambassador was reporting back to Beirut. The DCM suggested we have the U.S. embassy in Beirut make that point to Amin Gemayel directly.

Let me finish this session with events at the time of the bombing of the Marine barracks. In September 1983, there was an escalation of violence at a strategic hilltop village not too far from where the Lebanese presidency is located. The village was held by a Lebanese army unit, but if it

were taken by the Druze, backed up by the Syrians, Druze forces would be in a position to threaten directly the presidential compound. That also was near where the U.S. ambassador had his residence. At this point, Bud McFarlane was in Lebanon as a special representative. The people in the Pentagon hated having a senior envoy with McFarlane's background, constantly prodding for the Pentagon to get more involved. Senior officials at the Pentagon felt he was interfering with the chain of command. They were focused on not over reacting, not getting drawn into this conflict between Lebanese factions. They argued against doing military things for political goals. By contrast, Bud was entirely focused on using the military to attain political ends, but sometimes it seemed like he didn't have a clear, well articulated idea of what those ends were.

One morning the Operations Center called to say they needed me on the Lebanon task force, because Bud McFarlane wanted to speak to somebody. As I recall, it was about 2:00 o'clock in the morning on a Sunday. Before talking to Bud on the secure phone, I read the message he had sent. He reported a ferocious attack on the Lebanese army forward position. People had been killed in savage ways, such as with axes. McFarlane's view was that this meant there were Iranian revolutionary guards involved, because the Druses don't use axes. He said we had to respond with our military effectively. This would be in support of the Lebanese army, but we were being fired on too so there was a U.S. force protection justification.

By this point in Lebanon, the U.S. embassy and McFarlane had access to TacSat, a tactical satellite voice link, with far superior quality than what we had used previously. After I reached McFarlane on the TacSat, he told me we would need to have a high level interagency meeting to order a decisive U.S. military response, as the commander of U.S. forces in Lebanon told him they did not have such authority. McFarlane then asked me whether there was anybody in the room with me in the task force area. Actually, there was the usual technician monitoring the equipment, but I chose to consider that Bud meant anyone with substantive expertise, so I said no. He then asked, "Tell me David, do people in Washington think I've gone over the edge?" I made some kind of soothing comment, but I thought to myself, yes, this guy has gone over the edge. It was a very confused period in decision making about Lebanon. Senior people like Bud McFarlane were in Lebanon from time to time and in contact with the U.S. military units. The Pentagon feared, correctly in my view that such individuals were trying to affect U.S. military decisions on the ground without being part of the chain of command. Moreover, Ambassador Dillon was extremely skeptical of what McFarlane was up to, although he cooperated with McFarlane in helping him get access to key Lebanese leaders.

Q: As a presidential representative.

MACK: Bud McFarlane had been a presidential envoy, but he no longer had the position. Moreover, it was during this period that we were seeking a vote in Congress to authorize the continuation of our military presence in Lebanon for an additional three years. As I recall, the vote came on September 23. We got the mandate, but the senior leaders at the White House, State and Defense wanted to do nothing to give rise to more opposition in Congress.

The vote was very close, and it followed effective political work by the Reagan administration. The President had enlisted Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill as an ally. O'Neill spoke very

eloquently during the debate in the House of Representatives. Listening to him, I was very excited to be part of the political drama. In retrospect, I can't see how I could have been so blind. At the time, however, I had been working hard to generate political support for the authorization. I had been briefing people in the press and people down on the Hill, including then Senator Dan Quayle. As the votes came in, I thought, wow, we did it, we got congressional support to keep the forces in Lebanon.

Shortly after that, Dick Murphy arrived in NEA to replace Nick Veliotis as Assistant Secretary of State. While Veliotis was still winding up the assignment, I came down to talk to Dick in his temporary office about the Lebanon situation. He was an old-line Arabist whom I knew and respected greatly, and he really knew the area. Dick said to me bluntly, "We've got to get the forces out of Lebanon." I thought to myself, "What's the matter with this guy? Doesn't he understand? We've just achieved the great victory of getting congressional support for keeping the forces in." But Murphy knew instinctively that Lebanon was not a place for the U.S. to have military forces for any extended period of time. The military venture into Lebanon had gone on too long, and we had to get them out. He was absolutely right. That fact, of course, was driven home shortly thereafter when the Marine barracks in Beirut were bombed.

Q: Well, should we stop at this point.

MACK: Yes.

Q: I just want to put on the end here. So we've really covered up to the point where the Marine barracks was bombed.

MACK: In early October, yes.

Q: Of '83, and we'll pick it up from there. A couple of things I'd like to ask about, and that is the role of Congress, particularly anything with the Israeli lobby, or AIPAC, and their role. And then what happened beyond the bombing of the barracks, but also at some point, talking about how when you has time with Jordan, Syrian, and Iraq, and how we saw things beyond this Lebanese thing.

Okay, today is the 10th of July 1996. David, you heard what we were talking about. Let's first talk about the role of Congress in this, and AIPAC, and how you felt internal domestic pressures played on here.

MACK: Congress was still feeling its way to how assertive it could be given the new war powers legislation, which was a post-Vietnam development. Without conceding the constitutional legal point on the War Powers Act, the Reagan Administration sought Congressional authorization in September 1983 for a continued deployment of U.S. forces in Lebanon. Mostly due to very good working relationship in national security area between the administration and House Speaker Tip O'Neill, they succeeded in getting an affirmative vote. In the senate, however, it was a lot closer. This came as a bit of a shock to the administration, since the senate had a much stronger

Republican base. For whatever reason, the Reagan Administration had not established the same kind of relationship with the senate Democratic leadership that they had in the house.

I remember watching the House debates. The management of the bill was conducted by Congressman Lee Hamilton.

Q: ...*New York*.

MACK: No, from Indiana. Lee Hamilton was the chairman of the House Subcommittee on Middle East and Europe. He was very able and did a very skillful job of steering the bill through. Speaker O'Neill actually spoke from the floor of the House, which is very unusual, and spoke strongly in support of the measure. It was also true that there had been a significant amount of lobbying on behalf of the measure by AIPAC. This is interesting because there was a distinct lack of sympathy among many of the Jewish congressmen, and presumably senators as well, for the authorization to keep the Marines in Lebanon. They felt pretty well torn, I think, between the pressures they were receiving from AIPAC to vote for the authorization, and their own instincts and predilections which told them to vote against. We often talk about AIPAC lobbying the congress, and AIPAC lobbying the administration. This was a case where the administration had successfully lobbied AIPAC to work the issue on the administration's behalf.

The fact that the bombing of the Marine barracks took place shortly thereafter almost guaranteed that future war powers deliberations, or quasi war powers cases, would be treated with even greater skepticism. Not to say there wasn't a fair amount of in this case. While it was not my usual job, I had done some lobbying down in the congress, including with then Senator Dan Quayle who voted for. The administration put on a very strong effort. It also did a good job of managing the public relations and media, which tended to play up the notion that it would be a great victory for Syria if the U.S. were to withdraw its forces under this pressure. Later on, some of the people in the congress felt they'd been had. They liked to assert their authority, but they didn't like to take the responsibility when something went wrong. And this may be one reason why there was such resistance to subsequent requests for Congress to authorize military action. An example came in January of 1991 when the congress debated whether we should be prepared to engage U.S. forces in order to liberate Kuwait. The Desert Storm authorization was much tougher going than the Lebanon authorization, despite what would seem to be a far more compelling case for the use of U.S. forces. Congressman Lee Hamilton, among others, was among those who voted against in January 1991. And in the senate, as you recall, it was a matter of a one or two vote margin in favor. In a way, disillusion over Lebanon a turning point in administration and congressional relations with regard to these issues.

I'd like to make another comment about AIPAC, because it's personal. Very close to the end of my time in this job in the summer of 1985, I was invited out to lunch by two well known officials of AIPAC, [Ken Rosen and Martin Indyk, see below]. It seemed curious that they would invite me to lunch, since I was just about to leave my position as director of this office. I accepted the invitation with the cynical attitude that this is the way U.S. aid money to Israel gets recycled! Moreover, AIPAC represented an important view in the political process, and I wanted to see what they had to say. In the course of the lunch they raised the question of my next assignment. At that point, I was hopeful that I'd be going to an ambassadorship. They probably

knew I was in that zone. One of them, who I think is now the number two person in AIPAC, told me that he thought I was ready for an ambassadorship and asked whether I would like their assistance in obtaining the job. I declined the offer, saying I thought that I'd just let things happen the way they would happen. In my own mind, I was pretty confident that the assignment process would work out okay and preferred not to be in their debt. I let the incident pass but filed it away in my memory as an example of how this very skillful lobbying organization could have people throughout the congress, and the executive branch as well, in some sense indebted to it and owing them favors. I admire the way in which they worked the U.S. political system, even though I feel it's often unfortunate that they have such a predominant influence. AIPAC claims to speak for a part of the population which feels very fervently about Middle East issues, but it is not that numerous overall.

Q: I'm not sure, it has been some time, so there may be some duplication. But did you go out to talk to Jewish groups to present the other side of the coin?

MACK: Not to a very great degree. The Department used me mainly as one of the administrative spokespersons with other communities, particularly the Arab-American community, wider university groups, etc. For whatever reason, I think it was felt there were other people who could be more effective in working the Jewish groups on the administration's behalf.

Q: What about the Arab communities in the United States? What was your impression?

MACK: At this point, they were just getting themselves organized, and in many cases they were almost pathetic. I liked them personally and befriended a lot of these folks, but they did not do a very skillful job of representing themselves. Of course, they were badly split over a lot of issues, like Lebanon. Christian Lebanese immigrants and their descendents are the most numerous part of the Arab-American community in the United States. They were often were at odds with other members of the community who strongly espoused the Palestinian cause. Arab-Americans were a pretty disparate group. I spoke at some of their national conventions, etc. They were among the most hospitable of Americans and always very sociable, but often their lobbying activity seemed unlikely to gain them much support where it really counted.

Q: Going back to the aftermath of the blowing up of the barracks. Did you find yourself being sent to Congress to repair bridges, to patch holes?

MACK: Yes, I was often sent down to talk to staffers and occasionally to members of Congress. I did formal testimony on only a few occasions. One of the times I was sent down to do formal testimony was before a House committee that was investigating the deployment of forces, and the rationale for deployment of forces into Lebanon. That was a pretty rough hearing, as I recall. The Lebanon deployment did not have very enthusiastic support from the professional military. Their friends in Congress had heard the various murmurs that people were in Lebanon for political reasons, and that this was the wrong kind of situation in which U.S. forces should be engaged. It was more common for the Department to send me to the Hill to talk to staffers or to an individual member who wanted a briefing. Maybe he was making a trip out there, or planning to make a major speech.

Q: In your office was there after the barracks destruction. Was there a change of attitude to why are we here, and what are we doing?

MACK: The bombing of the Marine barracks was not such a turning point for my office, and our view of the rationale for their presence did not change quickly. The bombing of the American embassy the previous spring had been a far more traumatic event for us. I had friends who died in that bombing. It seemed a little ironic that so much more attention was given to the bombing of the Marine barracks than had been given by the U.S. public and media, and by Congress, to the bombing of our embassy. The bombing of the Marine barracks was terrible, and of course the loss of life was very high. It seemed a little peculiar, however, to describe the victims as innocents. In fact, a Marine Corps officer told me that he objected to describing this event as an act of terrorism. Marines, he indicated, were not victims of terrorism. In his view, it was an act of war, the Marines had handled some things wrong in terms of force protection, and he vowed they we're going to do it better next time. I thought that was probably the appropriate attitude for the Marines. But this was not the attitude, I think, for a lot of the media and the Congress, nor of President Reagan who I think in some public speech described the Marine victims in terms of innocent young men who were now going off to heaven, giving a somewhat different image than I think the world would want to have of the U.S. Marine Corps.

Reservations were growing in my part of the State Department as to how military forces should be used for the political ends of our country. Mind you, we had all adopted Phil Habib's view, which was that we should have done this rapidly, i.e. by the end of 1982. That would have been a little less than a year before the bombing of the Marine barracks. If we couldn't get the Syrian and Israeli forces out by the end of 1982, it would be too long. And here we were in the fall of 1983, so why were our forces there? As part of our job, we were continually trying to explain what the mission of our forces was and how it might be changed.

At this time, however, there were still some very hawkish individuals working on Lebanese issues, particularly in the National Security Council. Bud McFarlane had become the new director of National Security Council affairs, and he remained a true believer in the importance of the U.S. military mission in Lebanon. His people working for him, including young military officers, very often followed his lead.

Q: He was also a former Marine officer himself.

MACK: Bud was a former Marine and a very strong believer in the importance of our engagement in Lebanon. His staff would come up with new and different ways to use the forces, usually including getting more forces in, and having them take on very, very active missions up into the mountains of Beirut, or down south. One idea was they would press ahead in the south as a way of getting the Israelis to gradually move out, and they would follow in their wake. Another idea was that they would move up into the mountains and press the Syrians out by the act of simply moving ahead. In a previous session of these interviews, I described what it was like to work with Phil Dur, a good military officer, who was always very keen to be doing new and more aggressive things. I described how he called me up one day to say that his superiors were all out of town, and he was left there as the person who was briefing the President. In this connection, Phil Dur said the President has an appetite for making decisions, so he thought this

would be a very good time for the State Department to make a proposal along the lines of what he had been urging for a more aggressive and expanded U.S. military mission in Lebanon. It seemed to me like the sort of thing that should not take place without senior advisors being present.

On another occasion, I was in the White House Situation Room when an inter-agency group just below cabinet level took a decision regarding deployment of the U.S. battleship New Jersey to shell what was referred to as Syrian gun emplacements in the hills. Actually, they would have been Syrian supplied weapons probably operated by Lebanese Druze gunners, rather than by Syrians. Military deployment of the New Jersey was an idea that the political leadership in the White House had taken up with some enthusiasm as a way of teaching the Syrians a lesson, and getting them to back off. Ed Meese was in the meeting.

Q: Was he chief of staff?

MACK: I think he was White House chief of staff at that point. Meese's face was flushed and totally red, and since I had not seen him in the flesh before, I did not know whether it was his normal appearance. As they were talking about bringing in the New Jersey, Meese said, "Yes, it fires a shell as heavy as a Volkswagen." I thought to myself, is this the level of strategic and military advice that President Reagan is dependent upon? On the other hand, General Vessey, the very capable chairman on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was also there. By the end of the meeting, Vessey had pretty well gotten everything he wanted to get, mostly in terms of military command authority, limiting vulnerability and protecting U.S. forces.

From my talks with Pentagon counterparts, I knew there was a constant problem during this period of interference in the military chain of command by political people, and particularly people from the NSC.

Q: I've been interviewing Chas Freeman who was our ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time of Desert Storm and Desert Shield and he mentions this micromanagement coming particularly from Brent Scowcroft and others at the NSC during the time. You know, couldn't keep their hands off running something. It's pernicious, but it's probably there with everybody wants to get in on the action.

MACK: It was about this time, as well, that Phil Habib was no longer actively engaged. For serious health reasons, Phil had gone back to his retirement. The White House brought in a new special Middle East mediator, Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense and a former White House chief of staff.

Q: ...former Congressman.

MACK: Rumsfeld made four trips to the Middle East as presidential envoy, and I went on his second and third trips. My immediate boss, Bob Pelletreau, accompanied him on visits one and four. We functioned as his regional experts and were joined by two other State Department officers in addition to security personnel. We traveled in a small U.S. Air Force executive jet, and Rumsfeld was generous about sharing his views and experiences. He worked hard, and he

expected that his staff would do so as well. It was very labor intensive diplomacy. As we traveled, we were constantly writing papers to prime Rumsfeld for his meetings, and he would discuss the personalities and issues with us in some depth. Although the Rumsfeld mission was high profile, in my view it accomplished actually very little. He had good access to high level leaders along the itinerary, meetings were sometimes lengthy but, at the end of a day, it was hard to see where all this activity was heading.

Rumsfeld started the second trip by telling us that the problem in Lebanon lay with Syria, which echoed George Shultz, and we needed to figure out ways to increase pressures on the Syrians. Throughout the whole trip, as we were traveling with Rumsfeld, he would pepper us with short notes – the Rumsfeld “snow flakes” – and we were expected to react with papers and ideas of our own. The most memorable paper he had us do involved pressure points on Syria. At his urging, we were throwing in all kinds of things that seemed totally absurd, the kinds of ideas that the State and Defense bureaucracies would swat down for one reason or another. I came up with one that I thought might actually serve a useful political purpose, in addition to putting pressure on Syria.

One of the four countries for which I had responsibility was Iraq, and our slowly improving relations, still short of diplomatic ties, seemed to be at an impasse. I proposed to Rumsfeld that one way of seriously pressuring Syria and to make the Syrian government realize it wasn't a free ride for them to go after us in Lebanon, would be to bring Iraq back into a normal relationship with some of our friends in the area, such as the Egyptians and the Jordanians. I used muscular language, which seemed to appeal to Rumsfeld. It went something like, “We could drive Hafez al-Asad crazy by strengthening the Cairo-Amman-Baghdad Axis.” We had already described Syria's long standing rivalry with these other Arab states and, in particular, the bad relations between Baghdad and Damascus. Rumsfeld seemed to really love the idea. He called me up to his seat in the aircraft to discuss it further. He asked what I had in mind. I rejected some of the more imaginative ways of improving U.S. relations with Baghdad, suggesting that it was up to the Iraqis to respond first to our offer to re-establish formal diplomatic ties, something that would require them to show a minimum of respect to the U.S., rather than posing as more uncompromising than other Arab states. U.S. generosity to Iraq would not be appropriate at that stage, but it had been years since a high level U.S. official had visited Baghdad. Rumsfeld asked what I had in mind, and I suggested that for a presidential envoy for the Middle East to include Baghdad on his itinerary would sound good to me. When we got back from this trip, Rumsfeld promoted the idea around the higher levels in Washington, and I put it into the formal pipeline as an idea for the next Rumsfeld trip.

The core countries for the Rumsfeld mission were Israel, Lebanon and Syria, but we also visited a number of other countries that I recall, such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Rumsfeld's third trip to the region, and my second with him, included Iraq. To our disappointment, we did not see Saddam Hussein on that visit. Typically for the Iraqi government, as we took a step toward them, they got coy. Rumsfeld was able to meet with Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yassin Ramadan, who was one of Saddam's top colleagues in the Iraqi Baath Party and the government. Ramadan, as I recall, listened to Rumsfeld but said little, and what he said was Iraqi government boiler plate language, including the reasons why they were not ready for a closer relationship with the U.S. Our primary contact, however, was Foreign Minister Tariq

Aziz. He was a first class diplomat, even if he worked for a thug, and he played his role with Rumsfeld very well. Although he had met with us formally in his office, Aziz also came to the government guest house where we were staying for a relaxed meeting. Aziz offered Cuban cigars. I don't remember whether Rumsfeld accepted one. Rumsfeld was smoking his Chesterfields, as I recall, while Aziz leaned back with a cigar and poured on the charm. His words were something like this: "It was a great pleasure to see you in Baghdad, Ambassador Rumsfeld. You have had very interesting things to say, most interesting ideas. What a shame that His Excellency the President was unable to meet with you. He has a terribly busy schedule, you know. Perhaps, if you were to visit again it could be arranged. You would be very welcome."

It seemed likely to me that Rumsfeld would. He did come to Baghdad on his fourth trip as presidential envoy for the Middle East. This was one of the reasons why not too long after that we moved toward resumption of diplomatic relations with Iraq. I felt that I had sold a good idea, and a timely idea, for basically the wrong reasons. In my mind, there were better reasons to try to improve relations with Iraq than the value of annoying Syria.

When Rumsfeld left Washington on the fourth trip, conditions in Lebanon were deteriorating rapidly. NEA needed me in Washington, but the idea was that I would come to the region to join the Rumsfeld party in February, after his second visit to Baghdad, and as part of another effort to resolve the Lebanon crisis favorably.

Q: This would be '84.

MACK: Early February '84, as I recall. I got as far as Tel Aviv and found that Rumsfeld was curtailing the trip. Everything had collapsed in Lebanon. The army was about to break up, and significant parts of the army were disaffected from the Lebanese president. Ambassador Reginald Bartholomew, our new ambassador in Beirut, had told the State Department he would like me to come to Beirut to help him out during this period. Having come all the way to Tel Aviv, I said sure. A helicopter from Beirut was to pick me up at Tel Aviv Airport. As I left Tel Aviv, I crossed paths with Rumsfeld and his team, who arrived on the helicopter. As we passed one another on the airport tarmac, I recall Rumsfeld saying, "Over to you, Mack." It seemed to me his team was headed back to the U.S. with suspiciously happy sighs of relief. As I flew into Lebanon, I thought, "Rumsfeld knows something, and he is not coming back."

After this long helicopter flight, I arrived at what seemed to be almost a Vietnam type landing zone at Beirut airport. U.S. and Lebanese personnel were underground or in bunkers, because there had been considerable shelling of the airport from the hills. The helicopter touched down, let me off, and got out of there immediately. After standing in the open with my suitcase for what seemed like a long time, somebody from the U.S. contingent came out and grabbed me. Subsequently, the U.S. military moved me on to our embassy.

Reggie Bartholomew, as usual, was very upbeat, certain that we could work things out, but he allowed as how things were pretty bad. His adrenaline, I could tell, was pumping at a very high rate. When you see Reggie with adrenaline pumping at a very high rate, you see a guy right out there on the edge. He's a pretty ebullient guy to begin with. During this period, he was spending most of his time at his residence. Security had gotten so bad that he couldn't really get to his

office, still in the temporary facilities at the British Embassy. I stayed with Reggie for about three weeks. It was during this period, when the Lebanese army finally fell apart. We were having very intensive talks with Lebanese government leaders, including Amin Gemayel. Although it was not yet clear in Beirut, President Reagan was changing his policy toward Lebanon from one of, "We won't let the Syrians and terrorists drive us out," to "We've done our job, and now we're going home."

Finally, we were told to inform President Gemayel that the Marines would be withdrawn. I think we had three separate instructions in the course of four days or less. The first said something like they will be withdrawn but after a reasonable transition period that we can talk about. The second, as I recall, was that the Marines would be withdrawn in two months. The third was, they'll be withdrawn in two weeks. I don't remember the exact timing and figures, but it was a truly awful period. Reggie felt the ground was just disappearing under his feet. We had no confidence from one minute to the next about what Washington expected of us, or what Washington was prepared to do. In the end, the decision was taken to put the Marines offshore aboard U.S. navy and marine corps ships, to have them available in case of need but not to keep them onshore.

Q: While you were there what was Ambassador Bartholomew, or his staff, what were they saying about the utility of the Marines?

MACK: For Bartholomew and his staff, the presence of the Marines was an indication of whether we were committed to the central government. The Lebanese government was dependent upon our military and political support, if they were not simply to do a deal with the Syrians. The other side of the instructions that we were getting from Washington was encouraging the Lebanese government to accommodate themselves to the Syrians. Despite the earlier view of Secretary Shultz that Syria was the problem, that didn't surprise me too much. In thinking about the various alternatives to having U.S. military forces there, it had always seemed to me, and to a lot of other people in Washington that the Syrians did have a role to play in stabilizing Lebanon. Unfortunate though it was, treating them as the problem without also seeing them as part of the solution was getting us nowhere. We had encouraged the Lebanese and the Israelis to work to reach an agreement. We had done so without getting Syrian's support in advance; that clearly hadn't worked. The Syrians did in fact have, like it or not, a lot of security concerns about what happened across their very long border with Lebanon. It wasn't only the Israelis who had security concerns about what happened in Lebanon. It was also the Syrians. In fact, for the Syrians it was probably much more critical to the survival of the Syrian government, if not Syria as a nation, than it was for the Israeli government. For any Syrian government, it's necessary to have a handle on what happens in Lebanon in order to prevent Syrian opposition groups from operating out of Lebanon. I think we even got Shultz to express that once in a public forum. It may have been Shultz in congressional testimony, when he included a line about Israel and Syria both having strategic interests in Lebanon or something like that. Of course, the Lebanese government resented that terribly, because previously Washington had been telling them to stand fast against the Syrians, and indicating they didn't have to worry about our support. In my own discussions with Lebanese, I would use the U.S. and Canada example, coupling my disapproval of Syrian methods while expressing understanding of their security need for maintaining influence in Lebanon.

At the time our forces were pulling out, the Lebanese had to begin considering the nature of their relationship with Syria. It was painful to watch them do this. They resented the idea that our leaving, as they saw it, required them to strike a deal with the Syrians. But in the end that's what they did.

Q: With your involvement there, were you in contact with the Lebanese?

MACK: In my capacity as Ambassador Bartholomew's temporary aide and visitor from Washington, Reggie and I were seeing President Gemayel and other senior Lebanese on a fairly regular basis. Some of Gemayel's lieutenants were more flexible about striking some kind of deal with the Syrians than was popular with Maronite opinion. The Lebanese foreign minister was Elie Salem, an Orthodox Christian, as is the usual system, and President Gemayel also needed Sunni Muslim allies in his government, in particular a Sunni Prime Minister. At one point, as I remember, Gemayel seemed provoked and said something rather sarcastic like, "Well, I suppose you Americans wouldn't have any problem with me taking Rashid Karami as prime minister. He is Damascus' man, so that is probably what you want me to do." We didn't have any instructions on it. Reggie replied along the lines of "that's entirely your decision to make Mr. President," etc. It was one of those cases where we certainly were not telling them to avoid the Syrian embrace. We were telling them it was their decision to make. We no longer had the kind of leverage to insist that Gemayel not take a Prime Minister considered to be pro-Syrian.

Q: We weren't talking to the Syrians at this point?

MACK: We had a very distant relationship with the Syrians at this point. You don't ever stop talking to the Syrians. Rumsfeld had even gone to Damascus, where he had a couple of very chilly meetings that I was in on with Syrian officials. Despite ongoing formal contacts at a fairly high level, the state of the dialogue was not great.

Q: We're talking about February-March of '84 while you were there. Were you there when the Marines pulled out?

MACK: I'm not sure that I was still in Lebanon when the last Marines actually left physically. As best as I can remember, I was. In any cases, I was certainly there well after the presence of U.S. forces ceased to be a factor in the Lebanese situation. They had already been totally discounted by the Lebanese government.

Q: During that period were we thinking of maybe discontinuing our embassy there?

MACK: Some people in Washington may have been thinking of pulling our embassy out of the country, as well. We were in the process of building what was called an embassy annex in a more secure but less central part of Beirut. The idea was that we would move back to the old embassy some day, the one that had been bombed. Or at least move back to West Beirut, which was the center of political life. We were working on building an embassy annex in East Beirut, an area with a almost entirely Christian population.

In the fall of 1984, after our personnel had moved into the new embassy annex, it was struck by a car bomb. This happened despite elaborate security procedures, and despite being in an area that was part of Christian East Beirut and supposedly much safer. Nonetheless, it too was vulnerable to a car bomb. A number of people were killed. This time, not so many Americans died as did in the spring of 1983, but there were a number of people killed. They were primarily Lebanese, local employees as well as Lebanese visitors in the consular section waiting room.

NEA Assistant Secretary Richard Murphy and I got on the plane and were airborne within something like 36 hours to come out to Lebanon. I continued on with Murphy for a regional tour after the emergency visit to Beirut. The visit to Beirut was a good opportunity to see an embassy within a few days of a severe trauma. In a severe crisis for both the embassy and US-Lebanese relations, it was performing the job it had to perform. By this time we no longer had a military presence in the country, and the embassy was the last remnant of the official U.S. presence in Lebanon. They had just been hit by a truck bomb. Bartholomew was badly injured, and he had bleeding from a chest wound. When we first met him he was in bed at the residence. In fact, the entire embassy was in the residence, which was being used as a temporary chancery until operations could be restored in the shattered "embassy annex".

The Public Affairs Officer was out of Lebanon at the time, and the Lebanese and foreign media focus on us was intense. Aside from the Lebanon story, Beirut was still a gathering place for the international press that followed the Middle East. The number two person in the small USIS operation was a younger officer, a very astute junior officer named Carol Madison. She was an African-American woman whom I had met before in Tunis when she was doing an internship. Having gone through this bombing, Carol was in charge of trying to do something with all the press that was milling around. At one point, Carol came to me and asked my help in getting the attention of Assistant Secretary Murphy and Ambassador Bartholomew. She said, "We really need to have Ambassador Bartholomew come out and say a few words to the press. It wouldn't have to be very much, but there's a rumor that he's dead or dying, and we really need to stop the panic." I talked to Reggie and Dick Murphy about it, and they agreed. We literally taped Reggie up, and he came out to the residence living room, filled with reporters, and gave one of the classic Foreign Service briefings to the press. Smoking a cigarette, as he usually did, Reggie struck a debonair air. He waved at the press and said, "Hi guys." After reeling off the five or six points we'd written for him, doing it with great abandon, Reggie concluded with a "see you later," left the living room for his bedroom and collapsed immediately, blood oozing from under one of the chest bandages. I really admired the way Reggie and the whole embassy held up under those circumstances. There was not much of a U.S. presence left in Lebanon, and we really counted on them.

This was the start of the first of several regional trips I took with Murphy.

Q: You still had the same position?

MACK: Yes, I was still the Office Director for ARN, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq. However, we moved into a very different phase in late 1984. Many illusions had come to an end, and we were engaged in efforts to limit the damage. One recognition of reality was to try to broker an arrangement among the governments of Syria, Lebanon and Israel, that would somehow stabilize

the situation in southern Lebanon. This was in part a response to Israel's request for our diplomatic help.

The Israelis, at least most Israelis, did not want to stay in southern Lebanon. At the same time, they did not feel they could simply pull their forces out and leave their northern Israeli settlements vulnerable to shelling across the border. The same situation they're in now. In late 1984, they hoped the U.S. could broker some kind of solution to the dilemma. Israel had an uneasy coalition government, the so-called Government of National Unity, with Shimon Peres as prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir as foreign minister and deputy prime minister waiting to take his turn as prime minister. Yitzhak Rabin was defense minister. Shamir didn't trust Peres, and Peres didn't trust Shamir. In this delicate matter of southern Lebanon, Rabin was the one who had the unenviable job of trying to broker differences and represent this strange Israeli government of national disunity, as people called them. We met with the Israelis several times during the course of this shuttle, always with Rabin and sometimes with one or both of the other principal Israeli leaders.

My last trip with Murphy on this particular mission was in December of '84, and it ended the effort for the U.S. government at this time. I believe it was the third of three trips to the region trying to broker arrangements involving the three countries. In essence, the idea was that the U.S. would have informal agreements with Israel, Lebanon and Syria regarding southern Lebanon. While there would be no direct agreements between or among the parties, the "arrangements", as the U.S. called them would be mutually reinforcing. Typically, after unannounced U.S. Israel discussions in Washington or Tel Aviv, we would go to Lebanon and talk first to President Gemayel. Then, either together or separately from the president, we would talk to the prime minister. By this time, Gemayel had a pro-Syrian prime minister, Rashid Karami, that Gemayel felt he had to accept to keep the Syrians from beating up on him. We would meet with both of them and with the foreign minister. Then, we would go to Damascus to meet with foreign minister Farouq Shara and vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam, and sometimes with president Hafez Assad. We usually were able to meet with president Assad, and Murphy always requested that in advance through the U.S. Ambassador, as well as mentioning our request when we met with Khaddam. Murphy had been ambassador in Damascus, and the Syrians liked and respected him, so we almost always saw president Assad. Then we would go to Israel for publicly acknowledged talks.

A few times we also visited Jordan to discuss restarting the wider Arab-Israel peace process, but we did not talk about that in public. While the public rationale of the Murphy missions was to broker arrangements for southern Lebanon, there was a secret agenda to try to get the peace process revived. This issue arose, but without any expectations of progress, in talks in Damascus and with the Israelis. We made no public statements about the subject, and I don't recall that the other parties did so. Most probably, Shamir did not agree with Peres on this aspect. Many people in both Israel and the Arab countries must have been suspicious, but I don't think it ever leaked that we also had tentative peace process talks underway. The public focus was on the problem that Lebanon posed for regional stability. While Jordan seemed a stretch, it was just plausible that we traveled through Amman from time to time due to the awkward logistics between Israel and Syria, as well as Jordan's friendship with us and the shared concern that problems in southern Lebanon could destabilize the whole region.

In December of '84, when we started our final round of trips shortly before Christmas, we told all parties that we would stay in the region as long as the indirect negotiations over southern Lebanon appeared to have life. We wanted to complete them successfully, and we were prepared to stay on into the new year, even if it meant foregoing Christmas in the U.S. Our talks in Israel in the middle of the shuttle seemed very unpromising to me. The U.S. Ambassador in Israel was Sam Lewis, who was very experienced and wanted badly to see this effort succeed. He had argued that the Israelis had offered some elements which should interest the Syrians. After leaving Sam at the airport, I was finally alone with Murphy, who asked for my opinion. Dick probably knew that I had been biting my lip. As best I can remember, I said, "You know the Israelis have given you a pile of shit. They expect you to grow rose bushes on it, but this is not going to work." To Dick's credit, he gave the effort his best try when we got to Damascus. As upbeat as possible, he presented the Israeli positions about what they were prepared to do and would expect in return. Basically, the Israelis were only prepared to leave southern Lebanon under terms very close to the failed agreement that they had reached directly with the Lebanese, a year and a half earlier. Predictably, the Syrians responded with scorn and showed no interest in the Israeli proposals. As I recall, we met with Shara but Khaddam then declined to see us. From the Syrian perspective, it involved keeping southern Lebanon in the Israeli sphere of influence. In turn, we were asking the Syrians to obligate themselves to try to keep the Lebanese and Palestinians with whom they had influence from making any trouble in the south. When we learned that President Assad would meet with us despite the discouraging response from our first meeting on this stop in Damascus, I took it as a good sign. Perhaps he was over ruling his hard line Vice President. But Assad made clear they were not interested in the ideas we brought from Israel. He expected that we would deliver that message without softening it.

The last meeting was in Israel, after we had come back from Lebanon, where we had reported on the talks we'd had with Hafez al Assad. The meeting room at the Israeli Ministry of Defense was filled with a large group at the table, as well as Israelis and Americans around the walls. In addition to Rabin's top military and civilian advisors, Peres and Shamir had both sent their representatives to the meeting. The U.S. embassy in Israel was plugged in with various factions and gave us a sense of the degree to which key Israeli personalities did not trust one another. There must have been about 14 Israelis at the meeting. There were about eight of us, including Ambassador Lewis and others from the embassy.

After Murphy had explained what the Syrian reaction was to Israeli proposals and what the Syrians would be willing to do, it got very quiet. Finally, Rabin said, "Well, at least you'll be able to go home to your families for Christmas." Next, the Israeli chief of staff, Moshe Levin, a tall gaunt man with a very sad face said, "Yes, get the boys home for Christmas," which struck me as an echo of the late Vietnam War sentiment in the U.S. Then the Israelis started talking amongst themselves in Hebrew, and I asked one of the people from the embassy, what are they saying. They were talking about their troops in Lebanon. As the U.S. embassy officer described the conversations, they included that it was cold and getting colder in Lebanon, that morale was miserable. The Israeli forces were saying they don't know why they are still in Lebanon, they don't know who they can trust, they don't have confidence in their supposed allies in the army of south Lebanon, but what choice did they have? In short, the Israeli troops and their officers felt they were stuck.

From that meeting and the background information from U.S. embassy personnel, I was left with the strong impression that Israel had a bankrupt strategy for dealing with the southern Lebanon security problem. Because of disunity, personal rivalries, and also because it was a really hard problem, this Israeli coalition government could not make the political decisions that might enable them to resolve the dilemma. As a government and a nation, they were stuck. The tragedy is that over a decade later this dynamic among Israel, Syria and Lebanon continues with no real change.

Stuart, I'm trying to remember whether I talked about our work on the hostage problem?

Q: I think we did. I think we covered that.

[In fact, we did not, and it would have been a major omission from the edited oral history. The following seven paragraphs are David Mack's recollections of some key points regarding the U.S. hostages in Lebanon and a civil airline hi-jacking, as composed in August 2008.]

The bombing of the U.S. Embassy in the spring of 1983, followed by the bombing of the Marine barracks later that year, were the first episodes of a wave of terrorism targeted at American citizens, including diplomats, journalists and educators. As best we could determine, the perpetrators were extremist elements among the Shiite Muslim community. Some of them, at least, were motivated by family vengeance related to the imprisonment of kinsmen implicated in bombings in Kuwait. To an uncertain extent, they enjoyed the support and encouragement of Iranian authorities, represented in Lebanon by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which was training Lebanese extremists in the Bekaa Valley.

The capture, torture and murder of William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut, was particularly painful for U.S. government personnel. I had worked with Buckley when I substituted for the DCM in May 1983, and I considered him a professional and dedicated U.S. Foreign Service colleague. After he disappeared in Beirut while traveling from his home to the temporary embassy offices in West Beirut, we engaged in frantic, ultimately unsuccessful efforts to find him. Other Americans taken hostage included Acting AUB President David Dodge, CNN correspondent Jeremy Levin, other journalists and both Catholic and Protestant ministers working as educators. As I recall, there were about a half dozen hostages, several of whom did not see freedom until years later.

U.S. government efforts resulted in the early release of at least two of the hostages. One of them was David Dodge. After he was seized on the AUB campus, he was moved by his captors to the Bekaa Valley. From there, he was eventually taken across the border into Syria and flown from the Damascus Airport to Tehran. We learned of this latter movement, which appeared to be under full control of Iranian authorities, through sensitive intelligence sources. There was no evidence that Syrian authorities were involved, or if they were whether the involvement was at a high level or merely the result of Iranian bribery of low level Syrian personnel. After inter-agency discussions, the Reagan Administration authorized the U.S. Embassy in Damascus to inform the Syrian government at a very high level and with appropriate safeguarding of intelligence sources and to obtain their help to return Dodge safely. The Embassy made the

approach to Rifaat al-Assad, brother of the Syrian President and head of a Syrian security agency. In effect, they told him it appeared the Iranians had made fools of the Syrian authorities and betrayed the trust the Syrians had placed in their alliance. Rifaat responded rapidly, flying to Tehran and returning shortly with Dodge under his protection. Dodge was released to us and returned to his family in the United States.

A second case where I think we were helpful was with CNN correspondent Levin. Like Dodge, he was also moved secretly into the Bekaa Valley. Levin was held there for some months. Eventually, he was able to walk away from the place of his captivity and approach a Syrian military unit, which sent him to Damascus where he was released to the U.S. Embassy. Levin believed he had escaped. It seems possible that his captors yielded to Syrian pressure to allow his escape, since this had become a major issue in the U.S. media and in our diplomatic contacts with the Syrians.

During my time as office director, ARN had primary responsibility for dealing with hostage issues. This included maintaining contact with their families and U.S. employers, a process that was time consuming and demanded great empathy and tact on the part of the ARN deputy director and several of our desk officers. We also coordinated diplomatic and intelligence efforts to locate and gain the release of the hostages, as well as public information. In general, we enjoyed high level support in the State Department and from the White House. This included the very effective combination of diplomacy and use of sanitized but still very sensitive intelligence with regard to the David Dodge episode. Most of the families relied on us and showed outstanding patience at the agonizing delay. This was particularly true for David Dodge's wife Doris, who had considerable contacts herself in the Middle East and who fed the rumors and information she received to our office. We had different experiences with other hostages. In the case of Jeremy Levin, for example, his understandably frustrated wife took a somewhat adversarial approach toward the State Department. CNN headquarters in Atlanta was more inclined to be cooperative, partly because I flew to Atlanta at one point and briefed CNN's owner and CEO Ted Turner, showing him a videotape of Levin by his captors that had come into our possession and which we were using to build pressure on the Syrian government for assistance.

The final episode of terrorism during my time as office director was in early summer 1985, shortly before I moved on. It was the hi-jacking of a U.S. civilian airliner and its diversion to Damascus. The U.S. Embassy in Damascus worked closely with the Syrian Government to gain the safe release of the airliner and most of its passengers, but not before the vicious killing of an American Navy employee who was aboard.

After I left the director position, the responsibility for dealing with hostage situations was removed from NEA/ARN. There was a feeling, which seemed strongest at the White House National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane and his successor Admiral William Poindexter, that a more innovative approach would succeed in freeing the Americans who remained in terrorist hands in Lebanon. In effect, the hostage portfolio went to Ollie North, a hard-charging U.S. Marine officer. Within the constraints of U.S. law and policy toward terrorism, we had tried lots of things on my watch at ARN but could offer only a few success stories. Basic to our approach was a patient and persistent insistence that offering material concessions or undue publicity to

the hostage takers would in the end feed their appetite for taking hostages. It would raise the value of the American victims in the eyes of our adversaries. This was our message directly to the Syrians and indirectly to the Iranians and the Lebanese hostage takers.

Q: Dick Murphy came in sort of half way through. Dick, of course, is a Middle East hand par excellence. What was your impression of his attitude towards the situation in Lebanon, Israel, etc. Because he was kind of a new man, had been somewhere else and then was coming...

MACK: Dick Murphy had arrived from Saudi Arabia, where he had been a very successful ambassador, to be Assistant Secretary for NEA. He had extensive experience and was a superb Arabist. I'd known Dick ever since we were together in Jordan. He'd been very carefully prepared for the job. Basically, it was accepted wisdom that a career Arabist would not do well in that job because the Israelis would never trust him. Dick represented a risky experiment in that regard. Of course, starting in 1982, Reagan and Shultz had for a year or so been really frustrated by dealing with Israelis on several issues. They didn't like the Israeli-Lebanon venture, they didn't like the way the Israelis had dealt with us over that, and they blamed the Israelis at least in part for letting the Arab-Israel peace process bog down. The President and the Secretary were prepared to try some new things, and Dick was one of the new things. Part of the premise of this was that it would get the Saudis engaged in supporting us in Lebanon. In fact, the Saudis did get engaged during this period to an unprecedented degree in trying to help resolve the Lebanon situation. They used a lot of their influence with Syria, not always successfully, but they certainly made considerable efforts.

Before Dick came into the job, the Department had him go to Israel for more than routine consultations. It was arranged that he would spend time traveling in Israel to get to know the Israelis as a people. Dick also went to New York and spent time with people in the Jewish community. He did these kinds of things even before he actually got confirmed.

It was while he was awaiting confirmation, just after we'd gotten a successful vote in the Congress at the end of September, 1983, to authorize our continuing military presence in Lebanon, that Dick called me to his temporary office. As I previously discussed, the first thing he said was, how can we get our forces out of Lebanon? It's no place for them to be. And I had thought to myself, what's the matter with this guy? I was so caught up in the day-to-day expectations of my job that I had missed the bigger, broader picture which Murphy clearly had. Whether he had any encouragement from higher political levels at that early point, I don't know. But he clearly felt that we had to find some way to find an end game for our military presence in Lebanon. He was dead right.

Along with his overall strategic view about the Middle East, Dick brought an extremely good tactical sense to the job. He was very, very good. I was in a lot of conversations with him with both Arabs and Israelis, and I admired the way he could handle a meeting. From little vibrations he would manage to develop a bigger idea during the course of a meeting. He was not always adept at coming up with a conceptual framework going into a meeting or first addressing a problem, but once he started working on it, he was very creative. And it was a great pleasure to travel with him. He was a nice person to work with and fairly considerate of the people he worked with. He was

very demanding, however, in terms of performance.

Q: Let's talk about the other.

MACK: Regarding Syria, there's not much more to say. Our relations were very strained, although we continued to have diplomatic intercourse during the time I was office director, and it occasionally proved useful. Syria had sent a very capable diplomat to Washington as ambassador, and I met with Ambassador Rafic Jouejati from time to time, usually to complain about Syrian behavior. The Assad brothers and Foreign Minister Shara allowed him to do very little of value, preferring to manage relations with the U.S. in Damascus. A senior U.S. visitor could usually get a meeting with Hafez al Assad, but such visitors were infrequent and the meetings were never automatic. It was clearly an adversarial relationship, and not going anywhere. In my view, that was pretty much because of the Shultz doctrine, i.e., that Syria was the problem in Lebanon. [As described earlier, it is noteworthy that the Syrians were quite helpful on a few occasions, but we could not always give them full credit for resolution of a problem caused by terrorist acts for which they had at least partial responsibility. Another example was the release to Reverend Jesse Jackson of an American navy pilot whose aircraft was downed in the course of a mission over Lebanon. We made the best of that dilemma by cooperating with Jackson's visit to Damascus, at a time when senior U.S. leaders did not want to concede our weakness by asking for the help of the Syrians.]

Q: What was our consideration and evaluation of the survivability of Hafez al Assad?

MACK: Just as there is now, there were reports about illnesses from which Assad suffered. Astute Syria watchers did not believe that anything other than illness was liable to bring him down. Assad had good control over the officer corps, and he had a pretty good control over the country. There was a little subtext about his relationship with his younger brother, Rifaat, and the possibility of eventual estrangement. Rifaat had a tendency to try to promote himself as being the successor to Hafez, something that wasn't appreciated by a lot of the senior Alawite commanders.

KENTON W. KEITH
Deputy Director for Near East and South Asia, USIA
Washington DC (1983-1985)

Ambassador Keith was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. After graduating from the University of Kansas he served with the US Navy before entering the Foreign Service in 1965. An Arabic speaking Officer, Ambassador Keith served as Public Affairs Officer and/ or Cultural Affairs in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Syria, France and Brazil before his appointment as US Ambassador to Qatar. His Washington service included several tours in senior positions with USIA. Ambassador Keith was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1998.

Q: What about Assad?

KEITH: I mentioned Assad's relationship with Dick Murphy, but he was somebody the U.S. respected from his earliest days in power. He seemed to be a less impulsive leader than some of the other Baathis around him, and his role in the Black September events bore this out. I had been to Jordan just months before this happened and the swagger and almost arrogance of the Palestinians marching around the street with their Kalashnikovs made it clear in my mind that there was going to be a clash between the Palestinian groups and the Hashemite government. Thus Black September 1970 and Assad's emergence as the Syrian leader. When I arrived in Damascus in 1974 he had definitely consolidated his power. Although he was a member of a minority sect, there was a grudging respect – even admiration for him in much of Syria. By 1974 when I got there, he was already setting a record for longevity in a country that had suffered chronic instability for generations.

Q: We're talking now in 1999 and he's still there.

KEITH: His health is not great. But I remember him as a young man and yet the eldest of the Baath Party people around him. I remember going to a public meeting with all the Baath Party senior leadership on the stage, including the president, and being struck by how young they were – even he, who was five to eight years older than the rest of them.

Q: Could we develop any friendly operations in Syria?

KEITH: We had a very close relationship with Syria in the mid-1970s.

Q: I'm thinking now in the time when you were back in Washington.

KEITH: What came later was a very schizophrenic relationship with the Syrians. We were quite pleased when the Syrians entered the civil war because it looked as though the Christian population in Lebanon was about to be swallowed up. For his own reasons, Assad did not want to see that happen. Then our relationship with him was deteriorated rapidly because of his evolving role as the Lebanese civil war continued. With shifting alliances and ongoing violence, we then came to a point where we were shooting at Syrian positions from battleships in the Mediterranean. In less than three years we went from a point where we had an active AID presence in Syria, one of the largest in the world, and where we were genuinely making progress with the Syrians on the peace front. Along came the civil war in Lebanon and that changed everything – not immediately, but it put everything on a different track. We have not recovered from that.

Q: During this '83-'85 period, was USIA doing much in Syria?

KEITH: We had a reduced presence. We had gone up to quite a lot. But USIA never really left. At one point, I think we were down to one officer. That's the way we started in '74 when I went there to reopen diplomatic relations. So, we've had a kind of up and down relationship with the Syrians, recognizing all along that without them, we're not going to find peace in the Middle East.

HAYWOOD RANKIN
Political Officer
Syria (1984-1986)

Haywood Rankin was born in Washington D.C. in 1946. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on a Morehead Scholarship both as an undergraduate and in law school. During his career he served positions in Morocco, Egypt, Washington D.C., Syria, Iraq, Oman, Algeria, and Ivory Coast. Mr. Rankin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in July 1998.

RANKIN: In 1984 I was assigned as the second political officer in Damascus, until 1986. The ambassador was Bill Eagleton who had just come over from Baghdad where he had been principal officer (as we didn't have a full-fledged embassy in Baghdad at that time). The deputy chief of mission in Damascus was April Glaspie, whom I had known briefly in Cairo and is a dear friend of mine. She was deputy chief of mission for a year. Subsequently, it was David Ransom. The chief of the political section was David Welch who is now the principal deputy assistant secretary in NEA. It was a remarkable two years. The TWA hijacking took place, and it was a difficult time.

Q: Could you explain what the TWA hijacking was?

RANKIN: The '84 to '86 period in Syria was relatively calm in Syrian terms. Hafez al-Assad was there, he's still there, perhaps he will always be there. Events in Lebanon were incredibly fraught in that period and I would say the apogee of terrorism was the hijacking of the TWA aircraft in Beirut in 1985. When it was finally resolved, the passengers were brought to Damascus. We had a small embassy in Beirut, even after two horrible bombings of that embassy. As second political officer in Damascus, I always had my eye on Lebanon, but David Welch did most of the Lebanon-related work and I was more directed toward internal Syrian affairs.

This was the period just after Hafez al-Assad had had health problems and Rifaat al Assad, his brother, had made a push to take over and had failed. The history of Syria since 1970 is one of Hafez al-Assad being in power and there haven't been many real threats to his power. I came into the embassy just after one of the few had occurred so it was a period of his reconsolidating power in his hands. It was a pretty frosty period in U.S.-Syrian relations, as it was a frosty time in Israeli-Syrian relations. It was also the time when the Iran-Iraq War was going on and it was a time of frosty relations between Syria and Iraq.

Q: What was our feeling about how he kept his power? He came from basically a small tribal group didn't he?

RANKIN: Yes and this was one of the main focuses of my work as the political officer for internal Syria. The country bumpkins from the mountains, the Alawi Mountains of the northwest, had come to power, and you're right, they are a minority. But they were a minority who even

going back into the period of the French mandate had a presence in the armed forces far greater than their proportion of the population would have suggested. This was a way forward for the poor, illiterate mountaineers.

Q: This was true even in our armed forces for a long time. Particularly in the old days with the poor southerners that's where they went.

RANKIN: That's a very good analogy. You could think of the Alawi Mountains as being the Appalachia of Syria. These "Appalachians" had seen the army as the natural way for them to get out of their mountains and to find work and a career. They are Ismaili. They are a type of Muslim which is different from the mainline Sunni Islam that had always dominated the country going back to the Turkish era. The relationship between the Sunnis, particularly of Hama, and the Alawis had been masters toward servants and peasants. The Alawis had their own religion, effectively, and a strong sense of their own ethnicity. I think that has been the main secret to Assad's holding power. Even though there have been tensions and competition within the Alawi community, they have known that the minute they lost power, there would be a blood bath in which they would be the losers. Despite all of the jostling within the Alawi community for power and the occasional rumors one would hear of coup plots against Hafez al-Assad, at the end of the day there was a strong sense of ethnic unity and self-preservation. They were very secretive. It was very difficult for me to get to the root of this. The Alawis were very strong in the military, very strong in the intelligence services and very hard to get at.

Q: Could you get out and around much?

RANKIN: I got out and around all over Syria. I was arrested a couple of times for being where I shouldn't have been - once for being too close to the Israeli border, once too close to the Jordanian border. But being detained didn't bother me much. Very often one was stopped at various places. We were supposed to apply to the Foreign Ministry for travel and Ambassador Eagleton and the DCM always did when they traveled. I always made a point of not doing it. We somehow got by with it. I traveled a lot of places where I shouldn't have traveled, some places that were dangerous. But I found Syria and the Syrians, Sunnis and Christians alike (if not the Alawis), to be very open. They were willing to talk to you, particularly one-on-one. They were remarkably hospitable, and Syria has got to be one of the loveliest countries to travel around in. It has so many layers of history and it is a diverse country geographically and topographically. Those were two of my family's happiest years in the Foreign Service.

Q: What was the feeling in the embassy of what Syria wanted in Lebanon?

RANKIN: It was already pretty clear to us that Hafez al-Assad wanted absolute control in Lebanon just as he had in Syria itself. I must say looking back in retrospect, he certainly succeeded. It was he who had brought in the Iranians. They transited Damascus on their way to Baalbek. It was through Hafez al-Assad's role as intermediary that this Iranian support for the Shia in Lebanon developed. I remember writing a cable predicting that the Iranians and Lebanese Shia would be Assad's undermining.

I was wrong. Assad parlayed his relations with the ever-warring factions in Lebanon incredibly cleverly to a point that today the civil war in Lebanon is over, but it's over on Hafez al-Assad's terms. He is able to continue to manipulate the still feuding chieftains in Lebanon, to manipulate the legislature, to manipulate the president and prime minister in Lebanon. I really thought that Lebanon, particularly the Shia, would in time prove too big a tiger for Hafez al-Assad to be able to control.

The thing that so struck anyone in Damascus in those days, and I suspect that it is still true but somewhat less, was the extent to which Lebanon (small as it is, poor as it is, desperately undermined by civil war as it was, and still undermined by feuding as it is today) dominated Syria in an intellectual and cultural sense, and even in an economic sense. Most of what we imported into stodgily socialist, centrist, inefficient Syria came from Lebanon. If you wanted a radio, you had to go across the border and smuggle it in from Lebanon.

Here you had this cultural, economic, intellectual, and materialist domination of Syria by Lebanon but a domination of Lebanon by Syria in a military-political sense. I thought at some point that this imbalance could not continue to exist. Hafez al-Assad could not continue to dominate Lebanon. I believed that at some point the incredibly delicate game that he was playing would collapse, particularly with the Israelis also there desperate to undermine Hafez al-Assad.

When I arrived in 1984 it was on the heels of his deterioration of health in 1982 and '83. We thought his days were numbered. As we had seen with the Shah of Iran, when you are an absolute ruler and your health begins to give way, then you can no longer keep all the balls juggling in the air at the same time. You begin to lose control, particularly with a game as complex as the one that Assad and the Israelis were playing in Lebanon. Here we are today in 1998, you're talking about 14 years later, the man is 14 years older. He still has all the diabetic problems that he had then, and he is still the workaholic that he was then. He is not a well man and yet he has succeeded brilliantly in this game. If I understood the blood disease he had, it should have sapped his energy. And it is energy that an autocrat needs more than anything. I was wrong and he is still there and he is still going strong. Extraordinary.

HARRIET CURRY
Secretary to Ambassador Eagleton
Damascus (1985-1988)

Ms. Curry was born in Annapolis, Maryland, daughter of a Marine Corp family. She was raised at military posts throughout the United States. She was educated at The George Washington University, after which she worked with a number of non-governmental organizations. After joining the State Department she served as Secretary and Assistant to United States Ambassadors in Brazil, Senegal, Israel, Jamaica, Ireland, Hungary, Austria, Syria and Pakistan. She also had several assignments in Washington.

CURRY: After that, Ambassador Clark became Assistant Secretary of Consular Affairs. She frankly told me she wasn't asking me to continue working for her because I wasn't a self-starter, in that when there was nothing to do, I read the newspapers. I resented the fact that a civil servant did all the things I was used to doing for the ambassadors I had worked for, such as sorting and reading telegrams. I did work for her successor as Director General, Roy Atherton, until Bill Eagleton was assigned as Ambassador to Syria and I went there as his secretary. This was from 1985 until 1988, and my next-to-last post. It was fascinating visiting the country with the Eagletons.

Q: How did you find Syria? Syria is a difficult place, isn't it?

CURRY: The government was difficult. I didn't have to deal with the government, but as a country, it was fascinating. Ambassador Eagleton and his family took me on many trips they went on. I couldn't have done them by myself, because I didn't know any Arabic. We went to Turkey, and traveled around, looking at ruins. It was during the hostage problems. The Syrians, at that time, were not going to upset us. Well, they did upset us by not helping set the hostages free. But, we did have some very exciting times when the hostages did come out.

I gather that Syria is not as easy a place to live in as when I was there. It could be difficult. One of them smashed the front window of my car, because I had not understood I was going the wrong way on a one-way street, because there was no sign. The police asked me what I was doing. I thought he was motioning me forward, to hurry up and get out of there, but he wasn't, he was telling me to go back. So, he took his hand and broke my windshield. The feeling there was that it was too bad, but I was going down a one-way street the wrong way. But, there was no way for me to know.

Q: Did you retire after Syria?

CURRY: No, I had one last year. I went to Islamabad and worked for Robert Oakley. That wasn't pleasant at all. I had a few trips that were fascinating, but I didn't like the work, and I didn't care for some of the people. Then, I retired because of age.

DAVID MICHAEL RANSOM
Deputy Chief of Mission
Syria (1985-1988)

David Michael Ransom was born in Missouri in 1938. He received his bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1960 and Johns Hopkins School of International studies. From 1962-1965 he served in the US Marine Corp overseas. His career included positions in Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Abu Dhabi, Syria, and an ambassadorship to Bahrain. Ambassador Ransom was interviewed in November 1999 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: This was from 1985 to when?

RANSOM: From 1985-1988. Syria was a very different world. Essentially, we were going from a place where we had a very, very good relationship with the government, Abu Dhabi, to a place where we did not have a good relationship with the government— from a place where the Soviets did not have an embassy to a place where the Soviet embassy was the huge and dominating influence on the political scene. We were going from a place that was very rich and very flourishing to a place where socialism and corruption had stifled all growth and investment. We were going from a place where host government was concerned by the security threat that Iraq and Iran presented to a place which thought that Iran was its best friend, Iraq was something to be traded off, and the great threat was Israel. We coming from a place where Lebanese issues were raised, if at, all in terms of the share of the commercial life that Lebanese businessmen controlled to a country which lived right next door to a raging civil war in Lebanon in which it took sides regularly. This shows again just how different the Middle East is. The Arab world is only a world in the sense that some kind of Arabic is spoken—even if not mutually intelligible; otherwise the interests of the various nations in the area are quite divergent. It is the reason why the talk about unity has never become more than talk in that part of the world. It is the reason why Arab leaders find it so difficult to act in union.

Syria was unlike Abu Dhabi in many other respects. One was that it was such a fascinating country in terms of its history, archeology, climate, and sociology. We found it endlessly fascinating to travel throughout Syria. The government allowed us to do that. They had a rule that made it necessary for people to get permission if they left the city of Damascus, but in a magnificent sort of Syrian fashion, they never really bothered us if we were going out to just be tourists.

So, since we didn't have a hell of a lot to do with the Syrian government, we had a lot of time on our hands. We traveled on every paved road in Syria, to every site, to every province. Of course, it was hard to find things to do on the weekend. In Abu Dhabi, you went out on boats, you camped in the desert, you did some scuba diving, but in terms of culture and society, there were very severe limits on available attractions. There were no such limits in Syria. We spent a lot of time in the souk looking at the silver jewelry, rugs, and other things. We dodged all the opportunities to get involved in the antiquities trade. But there it was. It was fascinating to look at.

Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?

RANSOM: The ambassador was a wonderful man by the name of Bill Eagleton -- a real pro and one of the men who had more years in the Foreign Service than anyone else. He was a gifted writer and a man with a very light touch. He was most experienced in difficult posts. Syria was by far the easiest post he had ever had. He was a specialist in dealing with perfunctory Arabs and he did wonderfully well in Syria. We liked him very, very much -- both he and his wife. He proved again to be a magnificent model of the best in the Foreign Service. We have had a series of wonderful ambassadors for whom we worked. They all remained close friends and admired models.

Q: How did we view Assad and what were our relations - really with Assad more than Syria per se-- because I assume Assad was, as far as we were concerned, Syria.

RANSOM: Assad really was Syria in terms of the way power was wielded in the country and how decisions were made, particularly on foreign policy. He was a fascinating and complicated guy, a little bit reclusive, not someone you could just pop in to see, but we saw a great deal of him and I sat through an awful lot of meetings taking notes while he was meeting with American VIP's. I got a very strong impression of what the man was like.

Assad at that time was embarked on a scheme that has now been reduced to ruin. He has had to abandon it. We told them at the time that this was going to happen, but he persisted in this grandiose notion of rejecting all effort at negotiation until a strategic balance with Israel had been created. That basically meant drawing the Soviet Union in to support Syria, building up Syrian military strength so that they would be able to meet and counter any Israeli military threat. Assad understood power very well. He didn't pay much attention to economics and he didn't seem to understand that his country was in the grips of a downward economic spiral where per capita income was decreasing every year while no new economic dynamics were being created. He did hire as his minister of economics a man who Marjorie and I knew very well, Mohammad Ali Mahdi. Mohammad Ali Mahdi had lived next door to us and I befriended him at some point. He was a thoughtful and very decent man with an American education and an American wife. Mohammad Ali Mahdi's gifted economic background was plunked right into the middle of a tremendous struggle to eliminate budget deficits, efforts to get control of the currency, which was devaluing, end subsidies, open up areas for private investment, and channel money away from operating costs and into investment opportunities. He wanted to do a great deal more but wasn't able to because of the struggle with the Baath Party in particular and with the apparatchiks who were making so much money from state contracts. But we would occasionally have a chance to talk to Assad about some of these issues. We didn't get anywhere. He thought that socialism was bringing benefits to all the people and that nothing needed to be changed; all was all working well. So, really our main focus was on Lebanon and on Israel and a little bit on some other problems.

Q: How about confrontation with Iran?

RANSOM: The Syrians had a very bad relationship with Iraqis. The border was closed and there was nothing but enmity between the two leaders, Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad. When the Iraqis went to war with Iran, the Syrians cut the pipeline of Iraqi oil coming across Syria, a blow that was very painfully to Iraq. They closed the border and refused supplies and support. The Iranians had agreed to supply Syria with free oil. So, Syria had become a kind of Iranian surrogate against Iraq. That made for some very bitter relationships. It made for some very complicated political questions inside Syria since the whole northern part of the country was traditionally an extension of the Euphrates Valley. Wherever you went in northern Syria, you would see, on shop walls, pictures of the Iraqi national soccer team. That was a subtle way of saying "We don't support this policy of opposition to the beleaguered Iraqi state."

The border closings had destroyed much Syrian economic activity--the ports and the transit of trucks which carried a great deal of entrepot trade that went across Syria into Iraq. The border

closing had considerable negative “bread and butter” effect on the Syrian economy. It was “peace, *abril polititique*,” as Hafez al-Assad once said.

The Syrians also had disputes with the Turks, particularly over water rights and over the activities of the PKK (the Kurdish party that was seeking independence, at least autonomy, from Turkey). The Turks believed that the Syrians were supporting it. The fact is that they were. But they were doing it in a typical Syrian fashion. The Syrian view of such activity inside their neighbors’ borders was that “We are weak, you are strong, and we will therefore do things that make your life miserable and eventually force you to come to us to ask for our help. Then we will extract our pound of flesh but not give you everything that you want in the way of expulsion, etc. of terrorist elements.” We became involved because we regarded the PKK as a terrorist group, of which Damascus was filled--Palestinian groups who were eager to take us on as well as take on Israel. The worst of these groups was Abu Nidal.

The Syrian government got directly involved in terrorism while I was in Damascus. They were caught trying to blow up an El-al airplane--a very clever plot that went awry. That led to a British decision to break relationships with Syria. While we did not break relationships, we withdrew the ambassador and cut the mission in one half as an indication of our displeasure. I was left as chargé for over a year in a time of great tension and great difficulty. It was one of the defining periods in my diplomatic life. Marjorie was allowed to stay and run a USIS program. It had traditionally been true that, while despite difficult and strained political relationships, Syria was willing to tolerate and accommodate a large USIS program. It was a substitute for political relationships. Marjorie’s work by and large continued normally in this period of difficulty.

The Syrians are perfectly capable of pursuing a dual process if it serves their purposes. In the case of the United States, we may have wanted, on one hand, to punish and on the other hand, to attract. They found it perfectly acceptable to excoriate us in political channels, but to encourage us in cultural and educational channels. Our relationship was also complicated by the fact that while the Soviet Union was the great friend of Syria yet one would have been hard put to find Syrians who liked Soviets-- whereas every Syrian family had immigrants to the United States who sent home letters, money, and accounts of life in America that made it natural and desirable for everyone to be a friend of American society. They would try to draw a distinction between our government and our public. It’s quite possible. That’s what we did as far as their government and society was concerned. It meant that we had a reservoir of goodwill and interest in things American that the government had to recognize as a force in its own country.

I can remember going off to villages to look at archeological sites. We would drive in with our diplomatic plates on the car and someone would say to us, “Welcome. You are a visitor in our village. We’re so pleased to see you. We see you are diplomats. You must be Soviet diplomats.” “No, we’re not.” “Well, are you from East Germany?” “No, we’re not.” “Oh, is that so? Are you European?” “No, we’re not.” “Are you American?” “Yes, we are.” “We have uncles in Detroit. We’ll show you the letter he wrote. He has his own house. My God, he’s bought a gas station. Can you stay the night with us? What can you do to help us get a visa?”

The visa question was something that bedeviled us every day. Everybody wanted visas to America. The stories about getting visas were legion. One of the funniest was that one day Hafez

al-Assad was driving to his office and saw this big long line in front of the American embassy. He didn't know what that was so he asked his driver. He stopped and got out and went up to the end of the line and said, "What are you here for?" They said, "Oh, Mr. President, we're just here because we're trying to get a temporary visa to the United States. Of course, we want to come back." He kept asking people and he noticed the line was melting away. He got up to the head of the line rather quickly and asked the guard "Why did all these people leave?" He said, "Well, Sir, when they saw you were getting a visa, they decided to stay." Political jokes of that type, of cruel nature, were legendary in Syria. The sense of humor is not buffoonish as it is in Egypt, but it's very wry and lacerated. We collected these jokes and enjoyed it enormously.

Q: Let's deal with the two great relationships there. First the peace process in Israel and then we'll move to Lebanon. Did you play any role in either or was that above your pay grade?

RANSOM: To begin with, the Israeli government was in the hands of Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud Party at the time. There was no peace process, in particular with Syria. There was no peace process on the West Bank. We were still living in the aftermath of the Egyptian agreement. That's all that the Israelis were interested in. The Arabs, because of that Sadat agreement, didn't want to do anything more. So, there wasn't a whole lot to do. Our task, at least as I saw it, was to keep the Syrians informed so that they didn't miscalculate what they were up against. We didn't want them to misunderstand what the situation was - or to look for small openings here and there that might be usefully exploited. But these activities were just time filling measures.

There was no peace process. But it was in our interest at that time to make it appear that we were constantly looking for openings. George Schultz in particular did not like Hafez al-Assad. He didn't want to come talk to him. He didn't trust him or like him after what had happened in Lebanon. The type of personal relationship that is always so necessary in these situations--i.e. personal relationships with the president of Syria in particular-- simply never developed.

I remember well one visit that George Schultz was finally prevailed upon to make. He arrived in Damascus. He got off the airplane. He was dressed like a mafia don. He had on ribbed trousers, a ribbed sport-coat, a dark colored shirt with a white tie, and two toned shoes. He was coming to pay a call on the Mafia "don" and he was dressed for the occasion. George Schultz was a smart, good, tough guy and someone who should always be reckoned with, but there was no meeting of the mind when he and the Syrians went into discussions.

Q: This was after the Schultz Plan was developed, which Bob Paganelli told him wouldn't work. This sort of stopped things cold.

RANSOM: What stopped things cold was that the Israelis weren't interested in entering into new negotiations. They simply felt that the time would come when the Arabs would surrender. In the meantime, they would keep what land they had. They weren't interested in taking any risks at all. The major Israeli interest at that time was in lambasting the Syrians, monitoring the development of a Syrian missile and a chemical weapon, and in extricating Syrian Jews. We were not involved in any of that. The embassy was tasked to give our government warning of any military attacks on Israel. We had a very elaborate system for trying to spot that in advance. We didn't want any more October surprise wars.

Q: Did you drive by the ministry of defense to find out if the lights were on and that sort of thing?

RANSOM: Yes, we had a very long list of indicators, which should have given us warning. On one occasion when there was a partial mobilization, we managed to miss it for several days. We did pick it up eventually. There were occasional air clashes between Syria and Israel. The Syrians always lost airplanes and pilots and the Israelis thought this was a way of keeping the Syrians in their place. It wasn't hard for these things to happen. The planes flew quite close to each other which gave rise to some fire exchanges. There was also an occasional fight between Syrian and Israeli forces inside Lebanon. The Syrians had a fundamental defensive problem. They had attacked on the Golan, gone to the edge of the Heights and looked down into Israel and then had been driven back. Through diplomacy, they had recovered some of that land. But the Israelis were on top of the Golan Heights. The Syrians had to deploy their army across flat-lands to protect Damascus from a possible Israeli attack from the Golan Heights. However, the Israelis had also invaded Lebanon and were about half way into the Bekaa Valley. This actually put them closer to Damascus than they were on the Golan Heights. It put them in a position to drive straight north up the Bekaa and into Syria, cutting the coastline road from the rest of Syria. The Syrians had to defend themselves in the Bekaa Valley as well as being prepared to ward off the Israelis threatening them from the Golan Heights. They really couldn't do it. They didn't have the manpower and they didn't have the equipment. So, they were in difficult straits. They were fighting, in effect, a two front war and they couldn't manage it. The Israelis used this advantage cleverly to keep the Syrians off guard.

The Syrians constantly expected the worst from the Israelis. Part of our job was to try to calm some of the Syrian anxieties. We were able to provide the Syrians with some explanations of Israeli activity when it looked like the Israelis were very threatening and getting ready for major thrusts.. In some limited way, we acted as a go-between for the two countries,; it was a charged and difficult environment in which to work. Our contacts were almost entirely with three persons. Occasionally, Hafez al-Assad when there were visitors in town. Then the visitors tended to do the talking. There was almost no independent contact with Hafez al-Assad when visitors were not in town. You could get messages through by calling people in his office or through some other indirect ways. But you just didn't call up and ask to see him and hope to get in, particularly if you were the chargé, although the ambassador didn't have any better luck.

We had unlimited access, based on formal requests to the vice premier, Hadam, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We had a lot of contact with the guy who headed the American desk--a very clever, able, and decent man named Saka, with whom I became very close friends. As for the rest of the government--i.e. ministers whom the Soviets would see on the basis of just a phone call directly to the minister's office-- I never saw other ministers; couldn't get to see them. I could go see Mohammad al-Mahdi more or less because he was a friend. The other ministers weren't about to see the American ambassador or charge'. In any case, I was hard put to think of things to say to them, because we didn't have any programs, we didn't have connections, we didn't have trade, we didn't have intelligence exchanges, we didn't have military sales. We had sanctions that we had to enforce. We were the "skunks" at the picnic. Amazingly enough, though, we did have probably more time with these three officials than the Soviets did.

Q: With all this access, did you feel that the Soviets were pulling any strings or were they just the deep pockets into which Syria would reach and take out what it needed?

RANSOM: The Soviets were seen by the government of Syria as the great strategic ally against both us and against Israel. But the two countries had many deep differences particularly on debt issues. The Syrians had an insatiable appetite for Soviet military equipment even though they didn't make very good use of it and they lost a lot of it. They blamed the equipment and the manufacturer rather than the way it was used. So, American equipment in the hands of Israel made us look very powerful and made the Soviets look bad.

During my tour, the Syrians made tremendous efforts to bring in American oil companies. They had succeeded in finding oil where the Soviets had failed. There was an American oil company that was the wholly owned American subsidiary of Shell which was drilling in a very large new field in the eastern part of Syria. I always wanted to see if this success could not be leveraged into the development of gas resources and the increased use of electricity-- electrical generation, trade, and such. We worked on that, but we ran headlong into opposition to American investments from the socialists and the ruling party. Nevertheless, I tried my best to work on those projects with American companies who were willing to enter the competition. But the sanctions that we put in place effectively halted to all these efforts, particularly after the Syrian plot to blow up the El Al aircraft.

Nevertheless, when we or other people had the opportunity to see Assad, we always tried to talk about American investments. The Soviets were embarrassed that the Americans had discovered oil when they could not and they were embarrassed by the fact that the Syrians quite clearly were lying to them when they were asked for repayment of the huge military debt --or even part of it. The Syrians would say, "Yes, we have this oil coming in. We'll pay you. Now give us more military equipment on credit" and the Soviets were caught. Did they go ahead with more credits on the basis of promises when they weren't getting repaid anything? They did a get a little bit. The Soviets tried to sell spare parts on a cash basis. The Syrians balked. There was a lot of strain in their relationship. The Soviets felt that occasionally the Syrians would push things to the brink with the Israelis and with us and that in effect they were asked to bear the brunt of defending the Syrians under those circumstances. That was a source of misunderstanding between the two countries. As failure deepened in all the areas of Syrian undertakings - its diplomacy, its economy, and everything else - inevitably, the Soviets' disillusion deepened and frustration on the part of the Syrians with the Soviets increased. What looked like a very powerful and important relationship was actually a very troubled and fragile one.

Our difficulties with the Israelis were nothing compared to the Soviet problems with Syria-- a situation that I pointed out again and again to my Syrian friends and interlocutors. I pointed out that we got something from our relationship with Israel while Syria was getting less and less from their Soviet relationship. It was still a time when the Soviets were our great Cold War enemy. I developed a relationship with Soviet ambassadors and with the Soviet DCM in particular which meant that about once every two months we would go someplace private and have a talk. They were wonderful talks. I had come to the conclusion that the Soviets were on the skids and their position was going downhill. My lifelong concern about the Soviet threat was

being changed to one of a power in decline. My Soviet counterparts shared some of these concerns, but by no means were prepared to agree in the slightest with my conclusions. Our talks were quite interesting. I used to have a trump card. I would say, "Well, in this part of the world, my friend, you have one great disadvantage. You are friends with Syria and friends of Iraq and we are not. We have one great advantage. We are the friend of Israel and Saudi Arabia and you are not." When Egypt swung from one camp to the other, it was another strategic blow to them. Those were interesting conversations.

Q: What about dealing with the terrorists who were camped in Syria? This must have been of great concern to us.

RANSOM: We did as much reporting as we could on these organizations. That was difficult since we were denied by our policy to have any contacts with them. One could go to the Soviet embassy and see the representatives of these organizations lined up at the buffet table. I wanted nothing more than to sidle over and strike up a conversation, but I could not. However, Damascus was filled with embassies that were friendly to us and had lots of diplomats with nothing to do - Australians, Canadians, French, British for a while, other Arab states. We found that if we didn't make it too obvious, we could ask questions which these other diplomats would want to answer. They would actually go out and seek out Palestinians and others and come back and tell us what they had heard. So, we were able to do a fair amount of reporting on the organizations.

Also, the Syrians would tell us some things. Syria leaked in all directions. We picked up a great deal of information just from the grapevine. Our CIA station was extraordinarily good. There were people falling out of trees attempting to report to the United States since they disliked their own government so much and the station was extraordinarily good at recruiting and extracting information. I had never seen a better station and never had a better relationship with any station. They really did everything that we wanted the station to do. They were first-class spies. I thought they were magnificent and collected information that we couldn't. I always felt, incidentally, that the station was abetted in Syria because it did not have liaison relationships which stultified penetration efforts—as in most other countries.

Q: If you have liaison, this means you can't play games.

RANSOM: I think we could and you should do so, but the Agency won't. It's just a way of checking the Agency, I thought. It was a terrible way of doing it. Anyway, if any one should have a liaison relationships it is the State Department. The station didn't have it in Damascus and it was great. They could do what they were really supposed to do and they did it. We found out a lot about these Palestinian organizations. I remember one time going on a picnic to see a biblical site--a site mentioned in the Bible, a tiny community in a ravine way in the back of Damascus. On the way, we passed by a camp that was occupied by one of the Palestinian terrorist organizations. I forget which one. We knew where these things were. It was a training camp. Lo and behold, we noticed some on-going training on the hills behind the camp using hang-gliders. I thought that was the strangest thing I'd ever seen. I'd seen them running over obstacle courses and everything else, but I didn't quite think of hang-gliders as weapons of war. I mentioned what I had seen to our military attaché. I said, "They're really going sort of batty. They've got hang-

gliders out there.” He was a lot smarter than I was. He wanted to report that. I said, “Go ahead. Here is what I saw. There were two of these things and they were trying to launch them off this hillside. I don’t know if they killed themselves or not.” This group later tried to launch raids into Israel with these hang-gliders. They were caught. That was the kind of crazy stuff that they would do.

The relationship between radical Palestinian groups and between Palestinian groups of all sorts and the Syrians was very complicated. The relationship between the Fatah and Syria was very, very bad. In fact, the Syrians at various times arrested Yasser Arafat and did their very damn level best to see him killed. What appeared to be in public a very good relationship, an alliance even, was under the surface a very troubled and complicated affair. I think that it was one more of the presumed Syrian alliances that simply didn’t work.

Before I left, I had a conversation with the minister for foreign affairs. I should note that Syria was the only place where I have served where basically I could say anything I wanted as long as I was not insulting. They were polite people. They didn’t harass us. They treated us with respect. But they were very, very blunt. I found I could respond in the same very frank way as long as I was polite. The minister of foreign affairs was a man I did not much like - although he saw me and he would see me even as a chargé--the only chargé in town he would see. I told him that their relationship with Iran was not helping. Their antagonism towards Egypt was not helping. The Iraqis were getting stronger while Syria was growing weaker. The economy was going downhill. I went through all of the Syrian policies and said that to the best of my knowledge and belief, all of them were failing, including associations with the radical Palestinian groups that carried out acts of terrorism. I suggested that one way to change the Syrian condition was to trade at least some of these policies for something valuable, which Syria could do to Arab states, to us, and to Europe. My idea was an anathema to him. He said, “We’re never going to change our policy. It is based on high principles.” I said, “Well, it’s just not working. That’s all. My only observation is that these policies are unsuccessful and I think you have alternatives.” He did not agree, but within five years, all of these policies had been abandoned - the alliance with Iran, the veto of the peace process, the antagonism towards Egypt, the rejection of the Palestinian peace efforts, and even the final fact, which at the time I was there, suggested that Syria was not interested in the return of the Golan Heights. Getting it back was not the issue. The issue was Arab destiny, with Syria as the leader, and defending the Palestinian people against deprivations by the Israelis. Now that’s gone. The only thing they really want now out of the peace process is the Golan Heights. They could have had that if they had played their cards right earlier. They would have had a lot to give away. Now they have nothing to give away.

Q: Was the Iran Contra Affair during your watch?

RANSOM: Yes, it was.

Q: How did that happen?

RANSOM: I was caught up in it.

Q: You might explain quickly what it was.

RANSOM: The efforts to negotiate with Iran and to supply them with military equipment as suggested by the Israelis and abetted by them actually took place while I was in the Department of Defense in Washington. It started there.

Q: It blew up about 1985.

RANSOM: Yes, it did. I was in Abu Dhabi at the time. It was to me a horrifying example of policymaking gone bad. Everything was wrong about it.

Q: This was Oliver North.

RANSOM: Oliver North, Howie Teischer, Dick Secord-- my former boss at DoD--, and others. All of them were rightly pilloried for what they did. But what happened when I was in Damascus was rather more interesting, at least for me. As is now known, the U.S. was making tremendous efforts to extricate hostages from Iran. We were working very hard with the Syrians to get their help on this.

Q: David, in the 1985-1988 period, how were Lebanon-Syria relations?

RANSOM: During most of the time that I was in Syria, Lebanon was at war with itself. Also, there was a very large Israeli effort to support the Lebanese government in order to get its signature to a separate peace agreement. The Israelis were trying to build up a position of strength in Lebanon at the expense of Syria - or at least the Syrians saw it that way. Therefore, the Syrians were not very willing to do much that would have been helpful to us in Lebanon.

At the end of the day - and we have to jump forward several years to the time of the Gulf War - the Syrians got permission from all the Arab states and acceptance from the United States to play a role to end the fighting in Lebanon. They did so with a brutality and swiftness that was decisive. Lebanon is probably a better place for that. They forced the passage of a new constitution which did take some power-- but not much--from the Christians, but restored peace to a land that had been divided and troubled by sectarian fighting. That was always something that the Reagan administration resisted. Its suspicion of Syria was very deep, based on the belief that the Syrians and others had participated somehow in the murder of the Marines in Lebanon and had worked to frustrate U.S. and Israeli efforts in Lebanon. Nevertheless, while there was a large disconnect between ourselves and the Syrians on Lebanon, it was the only issue at that time that I could see which offered the possibility of cooperation between the two countries. In the final analysis, their interests were the same as ours: an independent Lebanon, a peaceful Lebanon, and a Lebanon where peace would reign. The man in charge in Syria of Lebanon affairs, below Assad, was Khalil Hadam. I went to see him several times, usually with visitors, but he was someone that I could see on my own as chargé if I had a message of importance. Hadam was, however, very difficult to talk to--a bullying, blustering personality in full command of all of the facts in his portfolio, eager to show that he was in charge on Lebanese policy; it was difficult to have a dialogue with him. We were, however, pushing the idea of a new constitution for Lebanon and we wanted Syria's support. In fact, drafts were brought from Washington by April Glaspie and Dick Murphy which we discussed with the Syrians. They never said "No";

they didn't say what they would do, but from that we could draw the idea of an Arab acquiescence. In fact, the Taif settlement when it was reached followed rather closely the type of constitution that we had had in mind. So, I think our guess that there was a possibility of cooperation on Lebanon was in the end right. But the end came very slowly and very bumpily.

Q: And this was after your time?

RANSOM: After my time; that's right.

Q: You said that we had the same goal in mind for an independent Lebanon. I always thought that Syria really had designs on Lebanon to take it over.

RANSOM: That's not true. The Lebanese would disagree with my view-- in particular the most embittered part of the Lebanese polity, the Christians, who had to give up their predominance in Lebanon in exchange for something like equivalence. They were not denied power and not put in an inferior position even though their numbers shrank terribly over the course of the Lebanese civil war. They probably don't have more than 25% of the population now. The Syrians were quite happy, however, to see the Christians with approximately 50.5% of the power. They thought in the end they could deal more easily with Christians than they could with other Lebanese power centers--particularly with the Shia group and the Sunni group.

What they really wanted in Lebanon, I think, and I've heard Assad talk about this, is at most some tiny, tiny changes in the border where there were clear differences. This is a matter of yards in a few places. Assad said in meetings that I attended, that essentially the borders were fixed and he had no desire to see them change. What he could not accept was a Lebanon that was used by another power against Syria--he had Israel in mind specifically. It's very simple to understand the strategic reason for this. Syria is basically a weak state that has to be focused on defending Damascus. Almost all of its military forces are around Damascus and near the Golan, where they have fought with Israel. As I noted earlier, If Israel were able to send its forces up the Bekaa Valley, which is a broad, flat plain, they could actually end up at the border between Syria and Lebanon closer to Damascus than they were from the Golan Heights. What would happen is that the Israelis in Lebanon could turn towards Syria, force it to redeploy its forces, and to face a whole new threat of an Israeli drive up the Bekaa and into Syria, cutting the road between Latakia and Homs, cutting the pipeline, driving towards the cities of Homs and Hama, cutting off the coastline. That was strategically unacceptable. Lebanon had to be a buffer against Israel, not a jumping-off place for Israel to invade Syria. I thought, that was a much more limited goal--not occupying Lebanon, but making sure that no one else did either.

Q: When you were talking to the Syrian official in charge of Lebanon affairs, how would your conversations go? What were you after? What was he after? How did it come out? Were these under instructions?

RANSOM: As I said, I went to Damascus as DCM to work for Ambassador Bill Eagleton who was my good friend and much admired colleague. Eagleton was there about a year when the Secretary and others decided to withdraw him along with about half of the embassy staff as a show of great displeasure on our part for the Syrians efforts to destroy in-flight an El Al airplane.

The Syrians had been caught in London trying to do this. The story was widely publicized. The British ended up breaking relations with Syria. We decided for a variety of reasons not to do that. Instead, we went for a halfway measure and then waited to see if the Syrians would break relations with us. They did not. I was left in charge of this skeleton embassy staffed with a lot of military and intelligence people who were looking for signs of mobilization or threats to Israel. I had a very limited brief to use in my talks with the Syrians. I didn't get a whole lot of instructions. I could go see the minister for foreign affairs and Hassad. I couldn't really go see Hafez Al-Assad unless a visitor came. Then I could go. The way to involve myself in that conversation was to give the visitor questions to ask and then occasionally insert myself into the conversation. Assad did not deal with charges', he said, and while he was always extremely polite to me, we did not have the type of easy and significant relationships that heads of embassies might have in other circumstances.

Neither did Bill Eagleton when he was there. It was much the same situation for him. But when I was there, it was particularly hard because of the jolt that our relations had suffered when we cut back after the discovery of the Syrian plot. So, with that as prelude, I would have to say that I carried on these conversations about Lebanon with the minister for foreign affairs, whom I could see if I had a reason. I could not sort of simply go up and call on him on a friendly basis. I would have to have a message. Then he would receive me. Once again, this was done with great Syrian civility. He could be sharp in what he said, but he always said it in a way that was correct. I could see Haddam pretty much on the same basis.

Beyond that, I have to tell you, there were very few people in the government of Syria whom I could see. Some of the other ministers would see me, but for the most part, I was shunned. I was ostracized as the American representative. After a while, the American government was willing to send Bill Eagleton back. The decisive action took place when the Syrians, after a wonderful visit by former President Carter, decided to throw out the Abu Nidal group. That was the peg on which the U.S. government hung its decision to return Bill Eagleton. It turns out that when you pull an ambassador out as we did from Syria, it is very, very difficult politically for an American administration to return him.

I think we were lucky that Bill Eagleton was only out for a year or so. In that year, I was in the unusual position of being chargé, but not a chargé who knew if an ambassador was ever going to come back or another one appointed. On one hand, I had to think about what Bill Eagleton might do. On the other hand, I had to think for myself. It was a time of some tensions and difficulties, but I remember it as a testing time that was very good. I was very proud to serve as chargé for that long.

Syria is a tricky place. We made some mistakes. But by and large, we kept talking to the Syrians. Years later when I went back to Syria and saw people in the ministry of foreign affairs, they said to me very plainly with their normal Syrian clarity and directness, "We like you very much, Mr. Ransom. We didn't always like what you said, but we knew that we wanted you to keep on talking to us and you always did." That meant that they had some dialogue with the United States. They could find out some things about what we thought and they could look for some isolated areas of cooperation, although those were precious few—drugs, Iran, the Gulf, terrorism, commercial activity, Arab League politics, the peace process, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey. On

almost all subjects, we were on opposite sides. Their reluctance to break relations in the end probably came down to the fact that they had to keep some sort of relationship with the United States since we offered the only possibility of restraining the Israelis. They had to be able to find out easily what the United States thought on a variety of subjects. That wasn't a lot to build on, but it was something. Oddly enough, I think, it was our relationship with Israel that led the Syrians to keep their diplomatic relationship with us going -- quite a contradiction.

Q: What about the American hostages in Lebanon? Did we try to prod the Syrians into doing anything about this?

RANSOM: Yes. That was a very large part of my business. We were looking for every way we could to get the hostages out. That led to one of the most dramatic and difficult moments of my diplomatic career and particularly my diplomatic career in Syria. President Reagan was personally affected by the thought that there were hostages in Lebanon. The Syrians were not willing to provide nearly as much cooperation as the American government wanted. Eventually the American government tried to make a deal through Iran. Bud McFarland and others (Ollie North) were involved in all of this -- people I knew from my days on the National Security Council staff. At one point, I received a message to me through the station chief rather than through the Department of State. It was a message directly from the National Security Advisor, Admiral Poindexter. He had signed it himself. I was enjoined from discussing the matter with the State Department. It was a matter of greatest urgency to the President. Washington thought that effort to free the hostages was nearing success. I was being alerted so I could get Syrian support when the release would take place. I thought at the time that, while this was a very unusual arrangement and guidance, it was a directive I could only accept. I did not tell the Department of State.

We had very difficult communications with State in any case. There was a secure telephone line, but you could hardly make it work. It was very, very difficult to get through. I couldn't send a message. I simply sat there and waited for something to happen. Then I got a continuing series of messages in the Agency's channel which alerted me to the developments. I talked to various intelligence people. When a hostage was going to be released, I was instructed to go to the ministry of foreign affairs to tell them that a hostage was coming out. I did that. The Syrians were dumbfounded. They were very nonplussed. In any case, no hostage arrived. It was shortly after that that the Syrians blew the whole story by press leaks to the Lebanese press.

Schultz in Washington blew up at a congressional hearing and denounced the activity. When he did so, he ordered that John Kelly, our ambassador in Lebanon, and I immediately return to Washington. I was summoned out of a dinner party in Damascus and told to get on the plane the next morning. I managed to get on that flight and came back to Washington with a series of stops.

There I found a full-scale investigation and a huge political furor. I should mention that before I went to the ministry of foreign affairs and contacted the government of Syria, I had called back to the department of State and told them I was doing this at the instructions of the NSC. I told the deputy country director, "I can't really in good conscience go to another government with a

message unless the Secretary in the Department of State is informed. So, while this seems to me to be in violation of the instructions I have received, I am telling you.”

I was kept in Washington for four or five days, grilled by all kinds of different people - was this a violation of my responsibilities, what were the instructions, what had I said, what had I done, what had others said and done? It was a very unhappy time for me. I was worried that I had failed my bosses. But eventually I was told, “Go back to Damascus immediately. Leave this afternoon.” I said to them, “You brought me here under the most trying circumstances. I’m going to spend the weekend in Baltimore with my brother, go see a football game, have a lot of beer, and then I will go back. Don’t tell me to go back soon!” Eventually the mess all worked out. When I got back to Syria, there was a huge amount of suspicion that awaited me, stories about what my real role had been, what had really gone on, etc. The Syrians did not like to be upstaged by Americans where the Iranians were concerned, where the Lebanese were concerned, where Hezbollah was concerned. They thought that whole thing made them look very bad and they resented it.

Anyway, our relationships with the Syrian government were terribly bad - except for the issues that I have previously mentioned and for the reasons I’ve told you. Our work went on as before. But it was a harrowing time for me.

Q: John Kelly had a worse time, didn’t he?

RANSOM: I think John Kelly had a worse time because he was much more deeply involved in the arrangements for the NSC people visiting Lebanon and was much more involved in the hostage negotiations and process. He actually hired a lawyer in Washington. John Kelly, never one for much false sentiment, asked me if I would talk to his lawyers. They showed up. I found myself being grilled by people who appeared to me would have been delighted to put me in a bad light if it put their client in a good light. I broke those conversations off. I had not much contact with John Kelly after that. In fact, I came to dislike him intensely later on. But at the time, we were both in the same predicament.

There was an occasion when I may have done a great deal to help John Kelly. At one point when he was in the ambassadorial residence up in the mountains, there was fighting in the area and shells began to fall around the residence. Kelly went into his bomb shelter and the earth shook and explosions were quite close at hand. Somehow, he got a call off to the department of State. The department called me. I immediately called the Syrian minister of foreign affairs and asked for an appointment. I told everybody I could talk to in the ministry that the shelling had to stop, or else the American ambassador could be killed. The shelling did stop. I was actually told by somebody in the ministry of foreign affairs that Syria had looked into the matter, which probably meant that it was guns under Syrian control that were being fired.

In any case, I called John Kelly and I got him in the bunker and talked to him. I said that I hoped and thought that I had been able to help from Damascus. That didn’t make him any happier in the end, even though the firing stopped. He felt that this was confirmation that he was a Syrian target and that they had actively tried to kill him. The shelling was not the only incident that persuaded him of this view. At one point earlier, his convoy had been fired upon and he dug a

shell out of the car. I believe he carried it with him (I was told he did.) as proof and a memento of the determination of the Syrians to do him harm.

I was not one of the State Department Arabists who thought that Assad was the answer to a lot of problems rather than the cause of all the problems. I had no illusions about what the Syrian state was doing to undermine us along with the Soviets around the region. In fact, I think Kelly painted me in the end as one of the Arabists whose association with the Syrians had tainted his judgment. When Kelly came to NEA as assistant secretary in 1989 and found me there, he very quickly made sure that I left the bureau, along with Rocky Suddarth, David Newton, Larry Polk and a number of others. I guess my first meeting with John Kelly in Washington after we were both recalled set the stage for later difficulties that proved to me that he was not a good colleague and not a nice man.

Q: What about Hezbollah? Was that going at that time?

RANSOM: There were two Shia organizations: Hezbollah, which was heavily dominated by the Iranians and the Amal, which was dominated by more moderate figures like Nabib Berri (whom I was able to see the night he came to Damascus). This was a little tricky because, again, John Kelly didn't like it when someone in Syria could see Lebanese political figures whom he had difficulty seeing, But I felt that was the one thing I could do; so I saw Walid Jumblatt, Nabib Berri, and a number of others when they came to Damascus. I reported these conversations in the way that you would expect a Foreign Service officer to do. But I never dealt with any Hezbollah members. The Syrians were going over-board in support of Hezbollah, bringing in large Iranian airplanes filled with guns, trainees, and other war materiel; they shipped the people and the materiel across the border. We documented all of that.

Q: I would have thought that given the Syrian goal to keep the Israelis from coming in and threatening their flanks as well as coming over the Golan Heights, there wasn't much in it for them to help arm what essentially was an irritant. It's like handing a kid a stick to poke the tiger.

RANSOM: I don't know if the Syrians saw it that way. They saw Hezbollah as a side show to be used to distract and divert the Israelis without having to take direct responsibility for it and therefore without drawing direct Israeli responses. They also felt that they wanted not to show their hand in the Bekaa for as long as possible. They were there in great strength and in blocking positions, but they didn't want to confront the Israelis directly and get involved in a war of attrition with them. They thought that the Israelis had the upper hand in the air and that they could not afford again to be drawn into an air battle, especially over Syrian territory since they would be defeated again as they had been before. There was one particularly damaging day when the Syrians lost dozens of airplanes in the air to Israeli fighters. It was like a turkey shoot. They resolved never to get involved in that type of aerial combat again. The Syrians wanted to limit the fighting, if any was necessary, to the ground, involving others, playing a supporting role while denying that any involvement; that was the perfect Syrian goal.

You have to remember that Syria is basically a weak state - at least they think of themselves as a weak state. Therefore, they look to proceed by indirection wherever possible. Only at the last minute might they take their gloves off and plunge into the fray themselves, but only when they

absolutely have to. They did the same thing with terrorist groups. They would let them operate and train openly in Damascus, but they denied that they gave any support to the actual terrorist operations.

Q: Did you feel the Syrians were taking note, however, of the American reaction to Libya - the bombing of Libya due to a bomb that was set off in a club frequented by servicemen in Berlin and the Lockerbie thing?

RANSOM: The Lockerbie explosion came much later. But the bombing of Libya took place while I was in Damascus; it gave me another very harrowing day as chargé. I was awakened in the middle of the night by a member of the embassy bringing a FLASH message that we had begun bombing in Libya. It was quite clear what the reason was. My first reaction at that time in the middle of the night was to call people in and start burning files because I assumed that the Syrians would allow attacks on the embassy the next day. But it was a difficult step to take in the middle of the night. It was a large issue. How many files do you burn? How much equipment do you destroy?

When I found out about the size of the raid (It wasn't just a single plane. It was a very heavy bombing raid.) and when I heard the pretense that we offered, I made one of those decisions that you have to live with afterwards. I'm only glad it turned out to be right. I assumed that the Syrians would be intimidated and would do nothing. So, instead of calling people to the embassy in the middle of the night, I decided to get everybody to the embassy very early in the morning to try to secure the embassy and people at that time to the maximum extent possible. I went to the foreign ministry and demanded extra protection and then we called all the people in town we could think of to tell them that we had done this. One of the things that you can do in a place like Syria where you don't have good official communications is let it be known to lots of other people with whom you have contact that the Americans were doing such and such. At least that pins the responsibility and generates lots of phone calls, "What are you going to do?" and "How are you going to protect them?" etc.

But the day was a very long one. We locked up the gas tanks in the embassy. We drove the vehicles off the compound. We reduced the staffing in the embassy to a corporal's guard. All the Marines were inside in battle uniform. I was there. We sent up lookouts on houses that we occupied so that we could see things coming. We set up communications with each other. We used radios openly. We didn't mind if the Syrians heard. I had to decide what we would do if the embassy was attacked. Since I was in the embassy, that was no small consideration. The challenge was that there was no way out of that embassy. Anybody who broke in the first floor and set a fire would drive us to the top floors, where we would be incinerated. Anybody who broke in the first floor could take people hostage. I thought that either one of those two considerations justified the use of lethal force. This situation raised a very interesting issue, which is that the chargé was the person who had to make decisions of life and death. There is nothing in the manual, nothing in the training of State Department officers, nothing that has ever been done to examine this issue, even after Tehran, where Ann Swift opened the doors to the Iranians. You're on your own. Most Foreign Service officers would say, "If you shoot, you enrage the crowd and you lessen the likelihood that you'll get protection from the host government," but my conclusion was precisely the opposite. If you shoot people breaking into an

embassy when it's clear that that is what you have to do to protect life and property, you are in a better position to demand protection from the government; hopefully you also intimidate the crowd and force it to reconsider what it's doing. I was sure that would be true in Damascus because any Syrian crowd would not be an inflamed mob, but would be under the control and direction of the Syrian intelligence services.

So, with this game plan - and again, I found it a harrowing set of circumstances - I was in the embassy with the RSO (Regional Security Officer) and the Marines and a few communications personnel (everybody else was scattered around town) when the demonstration started. The radios began to bring us word that it was moving up the street towards the embassy. I called the ministry of foreign affairs to tell them what was happening. I called the head of diplomatic security, a General Guree, and demanded more protection. It was with great relief that I saw a large company of Syrian riot police begin to deploy around the embassy with shields, weapons, cars, water tanks. It was a show of force. The crowd nevertheless continued to march towards the embassy, but were finally stopped by considerable riot force. So, we were protected. None of those difficult decisions that I had made about what to do in the case of an invasion of the embassy had to be put into effect. Later when I tried to interest people in the department of State in the events in Damascus- and this is a case study - suggesting that our experience was not in an isolated case-- the same situation had been faced before in Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere and would come up again,--there was no interest whatsoever in an analysis. It was too sensitive, too controversial; in any case I am not sure most people in the department of State would have agreed with the decisions that I took that day. But the alternatives of death or hostages seemed to me to dictate the answer. All I can say to repeat again is that I'm glad that our contingency plans weren't tested that day.

Q: David, Jimmy Carter and Syria. When did this happen?

RANSOM: It was 1987. I had been there for quite a few months by myself as chargé after the administration pulled the ambassador out and cut the embassy by one half following, as I mentioned earlier, the discovery of a plot by Syrian air force intelligence to destroy an El Al airplane leaving out of London. The Syrians nursed lots of grievances against the Israelis and apparently conceived this as an act of retaliation. It was by and large well planned, but it went awry in a very strange way. A Syrian operative went to London and managed by staying in a good hotel to seduce the chambermaid, a very simple Irish woman. He took her out and treated her very well and promised to marry her. His story was that he was an Israeli Arab and that he lived in Israel; he was going to tell his family about the marriage. The Irish lass was to go to Israel before him; she would be met by his family and he would follow right after her. So, he took her to the airport. On the way to the airport, he gave her a pocket calculator. He even made the special effort of saying, "Oh, look, your pocket calculator is on. The batteries would have run down." Just before he put her on the plane, he turned it off. Turning it off started the timer for the explosives that were in the bag packed in the sides of the bag in flat sheets. She was to carry it on the plane and he thought it would blow up in the overhead cargo compartment and bring the plane down someplace over the Mediterranean. But Israeli security noticed on the manifest this unmarried Irish woman who was going to Israel for the first time with no business or other reason to be there and singled her out for special questioning. They couldn't find anything wrong with the bag or with her and she stuck to her story. As the time of the departure of the plane

came closer and closer, they continued to investigate and eventually when taking her bag apart, found the explosives and pulled her off the plane. They then notified the British. The British went after the Syrians. The Syrian operative went to the Syrian embassy. From there, he was taken on a Syrian Air bus to the airport and there the British caught him. So, they had both the unwitting dupe, a very bitter young Irish woman who was being sent to her death by someone she thought was in love with her and the guileful agent of her downfall. There was a trial and the British ended up by breaking relations.

But as I noted earlier we did not. Therein hangs the story. It was not clear to me at the time whether our decision not to break relations would be mirrored by the Syrians, who had every reason for angry rejection of these accusations. Since this happened in Britain, the British under Maggie Thatcher very forcefully rallied all of the EU against Syria. The EU applied various sanctions, particularly on travel by Syrians of all sorts, but also on business, investment, and aid. That spread to the Far East. The pain was quite serious. We were denouncing them, of course, for this act of terrorism. But we had in fact very little actually to do with the investigation or anything else. Since we already had our own sanctions in place, it was the EU sanctions that were new and very painful. But in any case, it was decided in Washington that we would not break relations with Syria.

Q: My instant reaction is, we were trying to work on Syria to eventually come to peace with Israel? We would be taking away one of our cards if we did this.

RANSOM: Yes, but, in fact, there were no talks whatsoever between the Israelis and the Syrians at that time and no prospects of talks. We reported that. The Syrians had made the decision. The talks between Syria and Israel were futile when the balance of power was tipped so heavily in the Israelis' favor; the Syrians were openly espousing a course of building up their military strength with Soviet assistance until they could deal with the Israelis as an equal. They were also lined up with the Iranians. They were opposed to the Egyptians. In practically every area of operations, we had nothing that we could call grounds for cooperation with Syria. But there were some other reasons which probably were weighed in Washington--or at least should have. One was that we provided eyes and ears on the ground in Syria and could hopefully give some warning of any surprise attack--to avoid a repetition of the Syrian success in mounting a surprise attack in 1973. Having an American embassy in Damascus could spot mobilization, troop movements, pick up stories, etc.; that was no small consideration. The Syrians could have been spoilers in the Middle East. We needed them to understand what we were doing, how determined we were so that they wouldn't miscalculate and wander into adventures that might create worse problems.

Also there was the terrorism brief on which we worked very hard-- picking up information, stories, and making demarches. It wasn't clear to me that we were ever going to get anywhere with that brief. Still, it was a watching brief and it was important to maintain our position, I thought. If we simply abandoned the field, we would be unable to do anything. So, those were, I think, the main arguments for maintaining a relationship. What the Israelis thought about it I don't know, but I would assume that there would have been consultations between the Americans and the Israelis on an issue of such sensitivity. The word out of Israel even under Shamir, who was a Syrian hater, was not to lose contact with the Syrians. In any case, we made

our decision. The British went much farther than we did. They were much more the aggrieved party, of course, because the crime had been committed in their country. We stayed.

I then cast around by myself for whether there was any hope of mending our relationship with Syria, to keep up the discussion on terrorist groups and to look for some area for improvement. At the time the American sanctions were augmented, there was a considerable American investment by a company called Pecten in the oil sector. In fact, Pecten, a Houston-based company, had discovered oil in Syria after the Soviets had looked for years. They had gotten an old fashioned concession out of the Syrians and gone to work on it. The president of the company had dealt directly with Hafez el-Assad on this matter. It represented a considerable act of compromise on the part of the Syrians with their bloody socialist principles to allow American private companies to look for oil. When they found the oil in sizable amounts--amounts that promised to run up to production of 400,000 barrels a day-- the Syrians were enriched and pleased. There was some discussion in Washington of putting sanctions on this American company. I pointed out that it was a hopeless proposition. The American company was wholly owned by Royal Dutch Shell. In fact, Pecten in Latin means "shell." What would happen if we forbade American companies from working on this oil in Syria would be that Shell would simply take over the company; it then would become a non-American company, and everything would go on exactly as it had before with oil production running up to 400,000 barrels a day but no benefits at all accruing to the United States

Q: How about EU sanctions?

RANSOM: EU sanctions were not going to stretch to oil. That was one of the decisions that was taken, but otherwise the Washington sanction fever won out. Both Pecten and another American company, Marathon, had prospected in Syria and had found a great deal of natural gas. They were both upset by the sanctions regime. The head of Pecten, however, was a very thoughtful and very enterprising guy. He thought that something had to be done whether or not it benefited his company. Pecten was a small part of the Royal Dutch Shell empire and not a very big oil company on its own, but he wasn't about to see it lose this gem in its crown without a fight. So, he suggested that a high level emissary be sent to talk to Assad about terrorism and particularly about Abu Nidal and to insist that there were some steps that had to be taken against Syrian air force intelligence. I inferred this after the fact since such matters weren't shared by the bureau or whoever it was in the department of State who worked this out.

Q: Could you explain Jimmy Carter's position at this point?

RANSOM: He was a private citizen, although an ex-president. He was not the most likely candidate for the administration then in power to select and send. But he announced that he was coming without saying why. He just wanted to see his old friend, Hafez El-Assad. The Syrians were deeply suspicious. They insisted that I tell them why he was coming. Of course, I could not. I didn't know. I didn't find out until he came and told me.

I became responsible for making the arrangements for his visit, which I was very happy to do. Jimmy Carter was a man whom I admired enormously for his Camp David efforts. Since I was charged with making the arrangements for Carter's visit, I went about doing this very

punctiliously. We didn't have a whole hell of a lot to do in Syria in those days. Demarches were few and far between and always very insulting and difficult. But I had had my share of time with Assad as well as with the other movers and shakers in the Syrian regime simply because I was the American charge' and we had occasional American visitors. I would go with them. The Syrians were suspicious, but they didn't want to say "No" to Carter; they agreed that he would come. I called Carter and talked to him in Georgia and he said he wanted to go up to Assad's birthplace, a little village called Qurdaha in the hills above the Mediterranean coast in the northern part of Syria. I informed the Syrians that's what he wanted to do. They were even more suspicious now. "Why?" I said, "You'll have to ask him when he comes. This is what he wants to do. If you don't want him to do it, I'll inform him, but I don't see anything wrong with it."

Carter arrived. There was a proper Syrian protocol delegation at the airport to meet him as well as me. I took him to the hotel. I had arranged for him to meet people in the embassy just so they could see him and he could greet them. He began to unfold what he thought he was going to do in Syria, which was to press Assad on the question of Abu Nidal and the role of Syrian air force intelligence. In his mind, the international community had to be sure that some steps would be taken by the Syrian government against these two groups. I said he couldn't have come at a better time and he couldn't be a better person, but I had no idea if his mission would have success. Still, we were off to Qurdaha the next day. President Assad had provided his own plane for the visit. We went off and it was a fascinating trip. We flew into an airport near the village. A huge convoy of cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, with police, and dignitaries aboard was there to follow us up the mountain road to the village. We went to the tiny house where Assad had been born. His brother, Jamil Assad, met us and gave us tea. I translated. There was a very agreeable conversation. At one point after Jamil had shown us the closet in this tiny house where Assad had been born (There were not extra rooms in this house, so his mother had used this closet as a place for the birthing of her children and for a little bit of privacy.). Jimmy Carter looked around the room. Everyone fell silent. He turned his gaze on Jamil and said, "I wanted to come here because I was a young man in a very small town from a poor background who left his home with the thought of helping his country, got a military education and a military background and eventually became the president. I felt if I came here I would add to the sympathy and the understanding that I have for my friend, Hafez el-Assad. I wanted to start my trip to Syria with a visit to Qurdaha." I suddenly saw in a flash what his strategy was--to gain the sympathy and interest of Hafez el-Assad. I must tell you, I was deeply impressed. So was Jamil Assad. Jimmy Carter had been talking about how in the aftermath of his presidency, he cast about for things to do and had ended up for a while making furniture in the basement of his house in Plains, Georgia. Jamil said, "We make furniture right here." He went over to the side of the room and he pulled up a very rickety cane rush chair and he gave it to Jimmy Carter. I have that cane rush chair in the kitchen of my house here in Washington. Carter, for good reason, didn't want to take it back with him when he left on the airplane. But it was a symbol of a very personal kind of diplomacy that in my mind was extraordinarily successful.

Carter spent hours drawing me out on Syria. I dare say I was at that time the best informed man on Syria anywhere in the world. I didn't have an awful lot of people to talk to either, so I was happy to discuss the issues. He was skeptical about intelligence reports about Syrian terrorist activity. He wanted that confirmed. While I could give him accurate reports, it was clear that he

was still not completely convinced that everything he had been told in Washington was true. This changed in a rather dramatic fashion.

One morning very early, around 5:00 am, I went down to talk with him. It was a cold February morning. It was still dark. But the Syrians had brought out television cameras for a jogging expedition around the streets of Damascus. It was just Mr. Carter and me who were going out jogging. We had jogging clothes on. He said, "Okay, David, which way do we go?" I said, "First we'll go up the hill past the guesthouse, over the top of Damascus and then down through the city and back on the main drag. Don't worry, this time of day, there is no traffic at all. We have escort police who will take care of any problems that we might have." So, off we went. On the way up the hill, which is quite steep behind the Sheraton Hotel, he started out again by saying, "Let's talk about the economy of Syria." So, all the way up that hill, huffing and puffing, I talked about oil, water, electricity, remittances, tourism, and socialist industry and such. I finally got up to the top and I could hardly breathe. He said, "Now let's talk again about the Baath Party" and off we went. I had sort of a plan. Since I was choosing the course, it was going to take us right in front of the official headquarters of Abu Nidal. It so happened that the conversation worked its way around to terrorist organizations just as we were nearing this building. As we got in front of it, he asked me again in his most skeptical way whether I really thought that these organizations were here. In the middle of the street with cars all backing up behind us, I stopped and said, "Look there, Mr. President. See that sign? That is the Abu Nidal office in Damascus. See what's in front of it? A Syrian police guard box with a Syrian policeman in it. That tells you what you need to know." There was a long silence. He looked at me and off we went again and back to the hotel. He did not take me along on the visit with Assad. It was a private visit, he said, and I acquiesced, of course. You don't argue with former presidents. But by that time, I had gained a very considerable fondness, affection, and respect for Jimmy Carter. He was capable of telling outrageously funny stories. While he looked to Rosalyn for confirmation and for help at almost every turn, when it finally came to tell one of his stories, he said, "Rosalyn isn't going to like this, but I'm going to tell it anyway."

Q: Was she there?

RANSOM: Yes, she was with him this time, occasionally intervening with suggestions that were in some cases quite forceful. He always took her views into consideration. One of the stories he told, which I found at the time impossibly funny because it was impossibly unlikely that he would tell the story, was about a friend of his who had tried to quit smoking. He said it was very difficult. But eventually he said he did. He said, "I asked my friend, the good old boy from down in Georgia, if he ever forgot about the taste of a cigarette. He said there had been a time when he didn't think about it. Normally, he thought about it all the time and it was only an act of steel willpower that got him through the day." He said that he and his wife were out fishing. It was a hot summer day. They were in their boat. He said they were out by themselves in the middle of a big lake. He said that it was so hot that he said to his wife, "Honey, I hope you don't mind if I just take off my clothes." She shrugged, so he did. He removed his clothes. A little later on, he tried to reach for his bait box. The boat tipped. He fell forward and caught his penis in the oarlock. He said, "I forgot about smoking." Anyway, we got along famously.

When he came out of Assad's office, he said he had had a very good conversation; we'd have to see what the results would be. For several months, there were no results. When I was home on leave, I was stunned to read a cable from Damascus announcing that Abu Nidal had been thrown out of Syria and that the head of Syrian intelligence had been sanctioned and removed from his office. So Assad didn't follow Carter's suggestions right away. He waited for a decent period of time after Carter left so that it would be disassociated with that trip. But I think clearly this was an extraordinary act of personal diplomacy carried out with great imagination and great determination and it was very, very successful. It was those two acts that led to the return of the American ambassador and eventually the easing of sanctions-- our new sanctions-- and the restoration of a full embassy staffing. That was an extraordinary little vignette in my life in Syria, one that I am always very fond of relating.

Q: Tell me, on this terrorist attempt on the El-Al plane, in looking at this after the facts came out, was it your feeling that Assad called all the shots or that it had the acquiescence of Assad? How did you feel that fit in? It doesn't work very well. Anybody who looks at this understands that this sort of thing really backfires. Look at what happened to Libya.

RANSOM: Syria has a long record of involvement in terrorism and it's something that is a natural outgrowth of its own weakness and irresponsibility. They work through proxies in many situations because unlike us, they can't step up to the line and say, "I'm pushing you. Push back, if you dare." So, in Lebanon and elsewhere, faced with a technologically and militarily superior combatant, they had used terrorism routinely. There was no reason to think it wasn't a deliberate policy or for that matter it was a policy that didn't work or didn't seem to pay off. As to the narrower question of whether Assad himself authorized the attempted blow up of the El Al plane, any action of significance, particularly something that would deal with relationships with the United, Israel, or Europe, would not have been done without Assad's knowledge. I can certainly imagine intelligence operations being mounted, planned, prepared, etc. without his involvement in the details. But as for the need for presidential approval in a system like Syria's, I think it's very unlikely it would not have been sought. Renegade operations or wildcard operations didn't really exist.

Assad was not a particularly bloody-minded man. It was not that he liked to shed blood for its own sake, but he, unlike Saddam Hussein, who seems to really take a personal satisfaction in hurting people, was tolerant of it when it seems necessary. But he certainly allowed his own population to be mistreated when they "misbehaved". The torture, the brutality of his security forces, leaves me in no doubt that he would have acquiesced in the effort to bring down an airplane if it had seemed necessary to them. So, we don't know the answer. We can only speculate. But if you ask me what I said at the time, it was, yes, probably so, but we'll never know.

Q: It's interesting. If it had succeeded and the Syrians had been implicated, the Israelis probably would have wiped out downtown Damascus. This was bigger than anything that had been done to them. It would have given the Israelis the moral superiority to really do a number on Syria.

RANSOM: The Israelis had intercepted Syrian airplanes over the Golan Heights and shot them down. The Israelis had intercepted a plane flying back from Syria with the number one man in

the Baath Party on it, forced it down in Tel Aviv, humiliated the man and said at the time that there were terrorists on board the aircraft. They eventually released this guy, Abdullah Rahman, and let him go back to Syria, but only after a lot of laughing. The Syrians had discovered intelligence operations mounted by the Israelis against them. The Syrians had put up for a long time with the overflights of Israeli planes, small drones, which they didn't shoot down. So, they had what they considered to be grievances. The idea that it might fail, while real, was less daunting than the appeal of the possibility that an operation like this might succeed and therefore take Israeli arrogance down a notch. Again, I don't know that this was the way they thought about it, but certainly, the provocations in their mind existed and the desire for some sort of revenge existed. It looked like it was going to be a good operation. As far as I can see, it came within a whisper of working.

Q: You left Damascus in 1988. Bill Eagleton had come back.

RANSOM: Bill Eagleton had come back, something that pleased me enormously because I liked and respected him so much. He is still a very good and close friend of mine-- he and his wife both. But after the dramatic Carter visit, Bill Eagleton came back to Damascus. We had a very warm reception for him in the residence. It was probably one of the best moments of his life when he walked in and saw the embassy staff standing, applauding, shouting, and stamping its feet. I was very happy to return to being the deputy. Then Bill decided to resign. His successor was Ed Djerejian. He chose another DCM, so I left. I returned to Washington to work for Assistant Secretary Dick Murphy. It turned out that Dick Murphy also resigned soon thereafter (It was an election year.) and so I left that job. I ended up not with my great friend and hero, Dick Murphy, as a boss, but with John Kelly, who succeeded Murphy.

MARJORIE RANSOM
Public Affairs Officer
Syria (1985-1988)

Marjorie Ransom was born in New York in 1938. She received her bachelor's degree from Trinity University in 1959 and her master's degree from Columbia University in 1962. Her career includes positions in Jordan, India, Iran, Yemen, Washington D.C., Abu Dhabi, Syria, and Egypt. Mrs. Ransom was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in December 2000.

Q: You were in Damascus from '85 to when?

RANSOM: To '88.

Q: Did David go with you?

RANSOM: David was DCM. It was another DCM-PAO tandem, our third such assignment.

Q: What was the status of American-Syrian relations when you went to Damascus in '85?

RANSOM: When we went in 1985, the relationship was formal. The Syrians were having a lot of internal security problems. In the course of our first year there, there were perhaps at least seven or eight major domestic bombings. It was a problem they were having with a conservative Muslim group, the Ikhwan, with Iraqi backing.

Q: Your first job for the first year from '85 to '86 was what?

RANSOM: I was a regional program officer and worked to support our programs in the smaller countries of the Gulf. I traveled to Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. That was a short period from September to April.

Q: What sort of programs were these that you were helping to support?

RANSOM: I was working on our book translation program, trying to beef it up, organize group international visitor programs, generate articles for our regional magazine, and look at general management issues.

Q: With the trouble in Lebanon, where we were getting our books translated and magazine published?

RANSOM: The magazine was always published in Manila, where we had a special printing press. But the editors worked out of Tunis, which was a challenge because France is so strong in Tunis.

Also during that time I helped with the visit of Vice President Bush to Bahrain. It must have been the early spring of 1986. I ran the press center so the PAO would be free to work more closely with Marlin Fitzwater, Bush's spokesman.

Then I became the PAO in Syria in April of 1986. We had a number of successful cultural programs going with Syria. It was always easier to work on these long-term programs, than it was on specific short-term political issues with the Syrians. We were quite alarmed and upset with the news of the implication of Syria in the attempt to blow up the El-Al airplane in September 1986.

Q: What did we do?

RANSOM: We withdrew our ambassador, Bill Eagleton. We downsized our embassy. The biggest impact was felt in our USIS office. I was a PAO. I had three officers who worked for me and also a junior officer trainee; I lost them all. I forget now the total number. I think we reduced our embassy by 15 people.

Q: So, in public diplomacy, you were it.

RANSOM: I was it. I hired all the qualified spouses as quickly as I could to keep the program going.

Q: It always strikes me that in diplomacy we go through this peculiar thing – if we get mad about something, we downsize our embassy and often take away the top people who are supposedly the most skilled at dealing with it or they wouldn't be the top people. It just seems to be counterproductive.

RANSOM: The Syrians were not at all upset that we reduced the size of our embassy. They felt that the majority of us were just there to look and to spy on what they were doing. At least we were able to hold the line and not close. The British severed diplomatic relations. We did not. In retaliation for their severing diplomatic relations, the Syrians closed the British council, so they lost completely their cultural presence. We had a considerable argument within the embassy as to which part of the embassy was going to make the majority of the cuts. Washington set a total number that they were to be cut by and then left open to some dialogue and discussion where the cuts were going to come. Of course, Charlie Wick was then the head of USIA and he was furious at Syria. The story was scandalous. An operative (I can't remember if he was himself Palestinian or Syrian, but the whole operation was run with help from the Syrian embassy), a young man, sent his pregnant British girlfriend back to Palestine, to the West Bank. He was putting her on the airplane and he placed in her possession without her knowledge a tape recorder that had the bomb detonator in it. An astute El-Al airlines employee picked up something suspicious in questioning her. They inspected her luggage and found this device and an explosive. Someone who worked for the Syrian Embassy was directly implicated in the plot. They were caught red-handed. The British broadcast the trial on the radio in Arabic. You heard the testimony, the trial, the whole story. It was just amazing. So, the British took the diplomatic lead, of course, as it happened in London. They reacted by cutting relations. Our first act was to withdraw our ambassador. He left on very short notice. David became Chargé. But rather terminate our USIS presence, we took the bulk of the embassy cuts. I learned later that USIA's NEA office was able to argue to keep the USIS presence there because the PAO and the Chargé were a tandem. Otherwise, USIA would have closed the USIS office. Remarkably, we were engaged at that time in beefing up our English language program. We had laid all these plans beforehand and went ahead with them. We expanded the program, brought in a Fulbright professor to run the program, and somehow were able to pull that off. We had four American Fulbright professors in the country and we were able to keep them there as well. So, we were able to keep the basic part of our cultural program going. It was a considerable challenge with no American officer support. But in a country like Syria that's a closed, isolated country, what we were able to do in the cultural area had a considerable impact. We got extraordinary cooperation from the Syrian government. Even when they weren't agreeing with us politically, they gave a lot of importance to our academic ties. They even welcomed whatever cultural performances we could bring to Syria.

Q: Were young Syrians going to the United States to be educated?

RANSOM: Some Syrians were going, but not that many had the economic means to do so.

Q: What about ties to the Soviet Union at that time?

RANSOM: The Soviets gave huge numbers of scholarships. They had very close ties with the government. They had a number of Soviet military advisors in the country, over 100.

Q: Did the Syrians in the street have much regard... Did you feel that they were sympathetic towards the Soviet cause?

RANSOM: The people in the street were at that time amazingly pro-American. We traveled around the country and that is something I must say about Syria. We were able to travel anywhere freely. There were no restrictions on our travel. We were supposed to inform the Foreign Ministry when we were going to go 50 miles beyond the city, but nobody did it and they didn't pursue it. People would always ask us when they surmised that we were foreign – they would expect us to be Russian and they would find that that, no, we were Americans living in Syria. Almost inevitably, they would invite you home. They would be so enthusiastic. There are thousands and thousands of Syrians living in the United States - Syrian-Americans. Many of these people had cousins in the U.S. But many others simply loved what they had heard about the U.S. They did not like their experience with the Russians. They viewed the Russians as atheists. They were full of admiration for the United States. Of course, the worse our relationship was with the Syrian government, the more the people – and of course it's hardly a democratic country – would feel aligned to us. If they viewed us as cooperating with the government, then we would become suspect.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Syrian government, the Minister of Information and that sort of thing?

RANSOM: The Ministry of Information was at that time almost impossible to deal with. Newspaper editors wouldn't receive me. The language of the newspapers in those days was full of all the anti-Zionist propaganda. It was not very productive to try to influence them. That changed right after I left – with the end of the Cold War – when they finally decided that they needed to turn the press relationship into something. The primary person that I dealt with in the information area was the Spokesperson for the President Assad. He was someone who had worked for Assad from the beginning. He was very influential and set the editorial tone for the press every day. He really ran the whole press operation.

Q: As you say, the press tone was...

RANSOM: In those days, it was just a waste of time to try to influence the press. In fact, Secretary of State George Schultz visited Damascus during my stay after we had reestablished relations towards the end of my tour. What we did for George Schultz, who wanted to reach the Syrian people, wanted to get a message directly to the people without government interference, was to arrange a radio interview for him. We had Radio Monte Carlo, the BBC, and VOA. The Syrians rather sheepishly sent a reporter to the interview, but they didn't play the interview. We beat them at their own game by going to the radios they couldn't block out.

Q: How did we view things in the Syrian war with Lebanon?

RANSOM: We had hostages still in Lebanon in those days. I remember most particularly our attempts to get the cooperation and help of the Syrians with the release of our hostages. They always denied any direct knowledge of the whereabouts of the hostages or the details of their being taken, but they were anxious to get credit when a hostage was released. I think in the final analysis, we considered them helpful in getting the hostages out. The situation in Lebanon then was still very bad.

Q: What was the general feeling about Assad that you were getting from the embassy?

RANSOM: There was tremendous respect for Assad's political acumen, but he was obstructionist to any attempt to make progress on the Arab-Israeli situation. He would not hesitate to use radical groups based in Syria to support actions against Israel. Within the country he and his government were viewed as dictatorial, cruel, and tough. He was seen as a very tough minded leader who would not hesitate to be ruthless in achieving his goals. The country was very hard up economically. People couldn't get their basic foodstuffs. It was a very hard time for the citizenry.

Q: Was it the feeling that Syria was suffering because of the program of Assad? Supposedly, Syria used to be sort of the breadbasket of the Levant.

RANSOM: Socialism was failing. He was viewed as a very isolated person who relied on his close circle of advisors to tell him what was going on. He was obviously a man who felt under threat. Whenever he moved anywhere in the city, there was extraordinary security. He traveled to the coast, to Latakia and to Cardaha, his birthplace, but to few other places even in Syria, let alone the rest of the world. He never went to Aleppo, the other big city in Syria. He had a public mystique, not as bad as Saddam Hussein's, but he was a comparable figure. People blamed him for their economic hardships, especially people who were not Alawite. Don't forget that the Alawites were only 11-15% of the population. They, and perhaps some of the Christians and the Druze, supported the regime, but the Sunnis were and are roughly 70% of the population. His regime was one that was imposed on them. So, it was a tough dictatorship that advantaged Alawites and people from other minorities. He imposed such severe economic restrictions on the farms and the merchants that Syrians were never able to develop their country. What industry existed was government-run and highly inefficient, your classic example of a socialist run public sector.

Q: Did the war between Iran and Iraq, particularly relations with Iraq, create a tense situation?

RANSOM: This was a very bad period in Syrian-Iraqi relations. It's the question of the enemy of your enemy being your friend. The Syrians had close relations with the Iranians and cooperated with them in Lebanon as well. In the first year, a series of explosions was attributed to Iraq meddling in Syrian affairs. It was really a very bad period for Syrian-Iraqi relations.

Q: How did the George Schultz visit go?

RANSOM: George Schultz never liked to come to Damascus. He must have come three or four times while we were there. He would never spend a night. He would stay in Israel and fly in and go to the palace and see Assad and then go straight to the airport and leave. The only time we had with George Schultz was waiting for the meeting.

Q: Was there any effort on either side during this time to try to improve relations or were things at such a state that it was just a care-taking type of situation?

RANSOM: We exerted considerable effort to make it possible for our ambassador to come back. What we held out as a marker for the Syrians was an end to the Abu Nidal presence in the country.

Q: He was a top international terrorist.

RANSOM: He was operating at that point with Syrian government support. We withdrew our ambassador in October of '86. In February of '87, we got word that Jimmy Carter wanted to visit Syria. He was a retired U.S. President and was coming as a private citizen. He of course was able to carry messages. He was able to lay out for Assad what it would take, what the U.S. government feeling was about the incident in the UK, but also what we expected from Assad before we would resume full diplomatic relations. This was one of the most interesting operations we'd been involved in. David was Chargé and I was the next highest-ranking person in the embassy. We had suffered some harassment from the Syrians. The only way they could get back at the United States was to be mean to us. So, we had extra unwelcome guards at our house, harassment of people who came to visit us, and harassment of our Foreign Service Nationals. Our FSNs were called in late at night and questioned. The Syrian security services made things as difficult as they could. When Jimmy Carter came, we in the Embassy had to negotiate all the details of this visit. Everything that President Carter wanted, they thought we in the Embassy were proposing. They were highly suspicious and prickly over the visit. Jimmy Carter wanted to visit President Assad's birthplace. He felt that he had a lot in common with Assad. He thought he could take advantage of this by going to visit his village.

Q: The poor rural village.

RANSOM: A poor rural village. Jimmy Carter's father was a peanut farmer in Georgia. Jimmy Carter was the first son in his family to go to college. Of course, Hafez El-Assad was the first in his family to finish high school. Well, no foreign dignitary had ever asked to go to Cardaha and the Syrians were totally bent out of shape. They were furious at us in the Embassy. They were sure that it was the idea of that bothersome Chargé d'Affaires of the American Embassy. But we patiently worked out all these details with them and they put on quite a program for Jimmy Carter. They had to do an initial welcoming reception and they did it in an old palace in Damascus. The only embassy personnel who were invited were David and I. They wouldn't invite anybody else. They gave me the worst seat in the entire room. They put me next to the Foreign Ministry official who deals with Libyan affairs. I was way down at the corner of the room to show their displeasure. They gave us Assad's own plane to transport Jimmy Carter from Damascus and we flew up to Carghaha. We went in an

entourage from the Latakia Airport up to this village. We were taken to a tiny, simple hut where his oldest brother Jamil received us. This was where Assad was born. We were shown this kind of closet he was born in. Jimmy Carter started working his magic on the oldest brother, Jamil Assad, who was initially quite suspicious, and told him about his own family history and how he felt he and Hafez El-Assad had so much in common, mentioning that he too had come from very simple origins and against all odds had made it to become the head of his country. Jimmy Carter told him he was interested in the story of Hafez El-Assad because, as he understood, he too had come from simple origins, from this simple house, and had gone on to be the president of his country. You could see Jamil just melt. It was just wonderful to watch Jimmy work his magic. President Carter had asked for a tour of the village and they had not been willing to put anything on, but as the conversation went the right way, suddenly, we were taken on a tour around the village and all these old women, these Alawi women, were up on the roofs of their houses throwing down rice on us. It was a great celebration. It was just amazing. When the exchange of gifts took place, they produced a wonderful pair of 19th century matching pistols, highly ornate, for Jimmy. The Syrians were just as pleased as they could be.

Then we went on from Cardaha back to the airport and flew up to Aleppo. We visited the Aleppo Museum. Somehow, in Aleppo, everybody knew what was happening. Of course, the Syrians had done their best to keep this visit quiet. They did not publicize it. They did not want him to go to Aleppo. They were very concerned about his security in Aleppo because President Hafez El-Assad never went to Aleppo because of concerns for his safety in that Sunni stronghold. When we left the museum, there was a crowd of 200-300 people applauding Jimmy Carter. Much to the chagrin of our security escort, he waded right into the crowd like a typical American politician, shaking hands. It was wonderful to see. Then we had a tour of the souk and the same thing happened in the marketplace. The security had tried to clear the place of all visitors, but the Aleppan people had heard that he was coming and hundreds came and cheered. He got a very warm reception everywhere he went in public.

Back in Damascus, it was a similar kind of thing. He felt that he had very good talks with Assad during his stay and certainly for us, it had an impact further down the road. When Carter was in Damascus, he asked David to go on a jog with him around the city at 7:00 am. He wanted a briefing while he ran. He is quite fit for a man for his age. This was almost 15 years ago, of course. David jogged and took him by the Abu Nidal offices, which were in plain view of on a major public street. The Syrians had denied any involvement with Abu Nidal and claimed they offered him no support, but David was able to march Jimmy Carter right by the offices and point them out. This was before Jimmy Carter met with President Assad. When he met with him, whatever transpired was between him and Jimmy Carter, but Jimmy Carter was equipped to point out that he himself saw those offices in downtown Damascus. It didn't happen right away and it took the President's present emissary, Ambassador Vernon Walters, also making a trip or two to Damascus, to talk to Assad. But by June 1987, he could report that the offices had been closed and one of the major obstacles to a resumption of full relations was accomplished.

Q: So, who came back as ambassador, a new person?

RANSOM: No, Eagleton came back and stayed until, well he left after we did in 1988.

Q: Did the editorials and the official signs change at all?

RANSOM: They publicized the return of the ambassador and the resumption of relations, but the basic tenor of the press continued to be quite critical.

Q: I'm surprised that you were allowed to travel without being harassed.

RANSOM: You felt the heavy presence of the Syrian government in Damascus. When you traveled outside the city, you just weren't aware of it. You felt it in hotels. You were careful not to take pictures of anything that might be military. Of course, you avoided military bases or buildings. But other than that, we were able to travel wherever we wanted to. In Syria, that's a special treat. It's a country of extraordinary beauty and has important historic monuments for every period of history. We had a wonderful time traveling. Our military attaché was always tailed and watched, but we weren't.

Q: Were you there at the time of the Jewish wives who wanted to go to the U.S.?

RANSOM: When we were there, for some reason, the Syrians would not allow Syrian Jews to travel. I think they were afraid that those who remained would move for good. That changed, but the change came after we left. Congressman Steve Solarz did work on that.

Q: What about the Jewish community? Considering that there was a state of war between Israel and Syria...

RANSOM: I forget what the size of the community was. Even then, there weren't a lot. They were able to conduct business and were protected in any time of particular crisis with Israel. The security service was always careful to protect the Jewish community. But they were denied the basic right of travel. As the community dwindled, the Syrian Jews had problems arranging marriages and avoiding marrying first cousins. That changed, but that goes into my second tour there. Now some of them travel back and forth.

DAVID G. NEWTON

**Director: Office of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine Affairs (NEA/ARN)
Washington, DC (1988-1990)**

Ambassador Newton was raised in Massachusetts and educated at Harvard University and the University of Michigan. An Arabic speaking Middle East Specialist, he served both in Washington and abroad in positions dealing with Middle Eastern matters. His overseas postings include Yemen (three times), Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq. From 1984 to 1988 he served as US Ambassador to Iraq and from 1994 to 1997 as US Ambassador to Yemen. A graduate of the National War College, he was also assigned there as Deputy International Affairs Advisor,

and in 1997 he was Special Envoy to Iraq. Following retirement, Ambassador Newton joined Radio Free Europe in Prague. Ambassador Newton was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.

NEWTON: I can always '90, and then I went over to the national war college. I had a wonderful time for three years. I extended for a year. I still wanted to stay in Washington for my daughter. So I then went and went to work for the inspector general and worked for a little over a year, and she was graduating so I went and asked NEA if they would send me out again. They, I said I'd like to go to either Syria or Yemen, didn't matter. They said right away, we're going to send you to Syria. Then in the end when Bob Pelletreau went up to see Christopher, Chris said, "Well, because of the peace process I think I'd rather not change ambassadors." So he left poor Chris Ross there for six years, not a favor for him. Actually I was happier to go to Yemen because it was my last tour. I had never been to the south to the Hadramaut, and I could go to a country that I knew better than anyone else, to in all honesty, and it wasn't so important in the United States that they really cared that much. So I could have a very major role in the policy. But whereas in Syria the embassy, the ambassador was really shut out by Dennis Ross, out of the peace process. So then I retired out of there. I got to stay an extra year actually.

Q: Okay. Well we'll go back to 1988 and get you into going to deal with Lebanon in Washington.

NEWTON: Yeah.

Q: Okay, today is the 23rd of January, 2006. David, we were talking about 1988.

NEWTON: Okay.

Q: You were doing what?

NEWTON: In 1988 I had been, well through December I was ambassador in Iraq. I was drafted to become director of Northern Arab States, NEA/ARN. Dick Murphy was the assistant secretary. I was political counselor in Saudi Arabia. We worked very hard through, particularly through much of two years working with the Saudis on trying to get peace for Lebanon. April Glaspie had been the office director. So he decided we would switch jobs because he wanted someone who had worked on Lebanon. Dick was really trying to bring peace to the country. Actually I tried to get out of the job because I really felt I was getting burned out in Iraq, and I needed a change of pace. But I was offered a job as one of the ambassadors in the inspection corps. But Dick killed it. So I was brought in. Dick unfortunately left after a year and a half, but in any case I did that for two years and—

Q: This is from '88 to '90.

NEWTON: From mid '88, July '88 to I guess July, yeah, the end of the July 1990. The first thing we did even while I was trying to take a little bit of home leave was to go over to Syria and try to get the new president for Lebanon. I went with Dick with our two, our two country officers for Lebanon and Syria. We spent a whole week, working week in one room with Abdul Khalim Haddam who now claims to be a great proponent of democracy in Syria. That was certainly not

the view anyone ever had of him, but which wasn't a very pleasant time. We just went around and around the, and he would only give us one name. () whom he claimed had been given to him by the Lebanese Muslims. I didn't really think that was true, but in any case that's all we got. Then we made a one-day trip to Beirut to tell the Lebanese the result, not very happy result of the discussions. It had been a very chaotic election campaign.

Q: Let's talk about this. I mean, put it in perspective why were American officials going to Syria to talk about who was going to be president of Lebanon?

NEWTON: Well, because the United States had always been the protector of Lebanon, and the Lebanese had looked to us to try to, back in the Eisenhower days we'd gone in to save them. But we'd had the tragedy with the marines. So we were trying. The problem was the civil war had been going on, but at this point it looked like the whole thing might fail and the government, the country would split apart and that there would be no, there would be no president, and you wouldn't even have a common prime minister. That in fact was what happened. So we came there and basically our news was the only name we could get was () who was, didn't seem to particularly offensive or difficult choice. But in any case we said to them, "Look, your choice probably is either you accept this person for president or it looks to us like the country is going to break apart."

Q: I mean why were the Syrians in such a position where they could sort of give a name and no other?

NEWTON: Well, when the Lebanese civil war started the Christians, the Christians started it by massacring some Palestinians, but then the fighting got really bad and the Palestinians had retaliated against Christians south of Beirut, the () where () had his strongest support. The Christians were being killed then in retaliation against the Palestinians, and they asked for, they actually asked the Syrians to come in, and we acquiesced because there really wasn't any other choice. Once, it was even clear then that once you got the Syrians in, you weren't going to get them out. So they had come in, they had their army all over the country and their security services were becoming pervasive. So the Syrians were there, and they were dominating the country. So it really was a situation where the Lebanese Muslims also really were being dominated by the Syrians. So there wasn't going to be a president unless the Syrians approved.

Q: Well, how did we read the president at that time? Had he been much of a political figure?

NEWTON: Well, the president was a political figure. His brother had been, had been killed. Remember this is what led to the massacre at Sabra and Shatila. He had taken over, but his term was coming to an end. He was from an old () family, an old very political family. Families in Lebanon seem to go on and on as political figures. He somehow thought he could get a new term, which would've been against the constitution. Everybody was deluding themselves that they were, he or this other person would get to be president. But in any case it didn't work, and they of course exaggerated our ability to deliver anything for them because this was after the killing of the marines. The United States was not going to commit any military forces to Lebanon. We were not going to commit a lot of money. I mean we could, the Saudis were ready

to commit a fair amount of money. But in any case that's all we could get for them. April before me had worked very hard to try to set up reform.

One of the problems was that the Christians had a majority in the parliament from '99. I think fifty-four, forty-five which was unsupportable because they were probably now no more than a third of the population. So she had helped set up at least the framework, not yet implemented, for a parliament that would be fifty-fifty. To give more power to the prime minister who was always a Sunni Muslim and take away some of the very large powers of the president who was a Maronite Christian. Any case we came there and gave this news to people, and Dick did say at one point, "Look, we think you'd be better off accepting this man as president because of the alternative." So he went across the green line which is, I'd done once before, and it's a bit dangerous. But he went and talked to the Sunni Muslim prime minister and the Shia Muslim speaker of the house, and I went to see General (____), of course the very powerful Christian general and also went to see the leader of the Christian militia who was a real killer. It was a strange trip first of all. Lebanese fashion in those days, we went to the general's house, his apartment house. We got stuck in the elevator. The power went off. Had to crawl out of the elevator. He met us in his bathrobe and pajamas and had a broken arm. I said, he looked about to be the least military person I'd ever seen claiming to be a general. He, I was told later thought I was going to come to tell him he'd been anointed as president of Lebanon, which is I mean, just shows the power delusion. Then we went off to see the head of the militia who was very, no senior official had ever called on him before. He was extremely soft-spoken and polite. But I've always remarked, I don't know if it's because I knew his reputation, but he had the coldest eyes of anyone I'd ever seen. He was notorious for having killed off opponents, absolutely ruthless. So and then we left town. Dick suggested I stay around another day or two, and I thought this doesn't make any sense to me.

Q: What about Jumblatt?

NEWTON: Well, Jumblatt of the Druze is a significant, still a significant political figure, but the Druze don't have any, traditionally I think they had the minister of defense portfolio. But this was really a struggle between the Maronite Christians and the Muslims. The Druze really weren't central to it in many cases.

Q: What did it mean by having power if you were one religion or another? Does that mean you got all the goodies the money, the positions and all and others didn't get anything or—? How did that seem to work out?

NEWTON: Well, it depended. The Sunni Muslims who were urbanized mostly. They did well in the government and the Maronite Christians. The main problem was the Shia among the Lebanese the Shia in the south who'd been left out of the general prosperity I guess partly because they bordered Israel, and the border was closed. They were still very much dominated by traditional people, but as Lebanon grew more prosperous the people who had the most money were very niggardly in sharing the wealth. It was a Levantine economy. The government was very weak because people wanted it to be weak. Of course the catalyst for this of course was the presence of the Palestinians. That wasn't such a big problem until Black September and Jordan in 1970 when the PLO and the other PFLP (Popular Liberation Front for Palestine) and the other

political organizations had to flee from Jordan, and they set up shop in Beirut. The Palestinians had already slowly become more of a political factor, and then suddenly there was a big jump. The Palestinians were supporting the Muslims who tended to be more to the left. At least the Muslims who were to the left, and this unbalanced the whole political delicate balance in Lebanon. But the fundamental problems I always thought were Lebanese, not Palestinians. But the Palestinians were the catalysts that speeded up this process.

Q: Was the economy beginning to come back from the civil war by this time?

NEWTON: No, not really. I don't think it's never come back that well. I mean even though there was, after the civil war there's been a lot of rebuilding. But Lebanon was the much poorer country than it was. Partly the civil war but partly because a lot of Lebanon's prosperity depended on providing services to other Arabs, particularly Gulf Arabs and they didn't need, they didn't need Lebanese banks anymore. They didn't need Lebanese middlemen. The people in the Gulf because more sophisticated and they dealt internationally with Europe, the United States—

Q: This is tape four, side one with David Newton. Yeah.

NEWTON: The Lebanese also had depended a lot on Arab tourism. That began to die off too as Arabs began to go and spend their summers in Europe and so forth. The tourism has come back probably 9/11 and the hostility they feel outside the Arab world. But the rest of the economy hasn't recovered all that well.

Q: Did, well, now your particular job covered what countries?

NEWTON: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and we also were responsible for the PLO. We were, when I came on, just as I came on the job, King Hussein had given up the right to the West Bank so our responsibilities for the West Bank ended. But we still remained responsible for the PLO. We had to write, the PLO Act that Congress passed that required a yearly report. So we had to do that. But we had a Palestinian affairs officer.

Q: Did the Israelis through their allies in Lebanon have any say in anything or were they, the political process?

NEWTON: I think the Israelis had by this point began to realize that the Maronites had actually used them more than the Israelis had used the Maronites. Even in this case—

Q: So turnabout—

NEWTON: Yeah, maybe the Israelis were out of their league. Of course the Israelis had been so damaged by the massacre in Sabra and Shatila in which they were certainly complicit. I mean they provided the lighting so the operation could go on at night. They were, anyone who knew anything about Lebanon knew that you left the Maronite militia in there after the killing of Bashir Gemayel they would kill every living thing in there, and that's really what they did. The Israelis on the ground had to know full well what would've happened. So they were really

besmirched by this. The president actually turned out the next day, the day we were there and were leaving. We were invited to lunch by the president, I mean Gemayel in the family castle up in the hills, and it was his last day. He was trying to be a good host, but every time the conversation stopped he would look kind of despondent because he'd finally realized he was not going to continue as president. I always remember his mother, his father Sheik Pierre who is a long time prominent politician, has passed away, but his mother was still there. His mother kind of reminded me of Maude Barker—

Q: We're talking about a famous gangster.

NEWTON: Yeah, and on the way out she sort of grabbed Dick Murphy and said to him in French, "Don't let those Negra take over Lebanon," meaning the Syrians. Don't let the niggers take over Lebanon.

Q: Oh boy.

NEWTON: Yeah, that kind of summed it all up for me. I didn't, Dick had suggested that I stick around, but I really didn't see. I mean if we had any hope of getting the Lebanese to accept this person as president and try to keep the country together. The only hope really lay I think in the shock value of what we'd said. To stay around and talk to people would've only I think enmeshed us in Lebanese politics. It had been a very bad election campaign. It seemed like every week there was a new name would be surfaced as the leading candidate for president. And then the Lebanese would spend the rest of the week tarring this person and ruining him, and so the next week there'd be someone new. So it was a really dirty election campaign.

Q: Who was our ambassador there?

NEWTON: John, John Kelly. He then came back and, John actually wasn't there. John had had some heart problems, and although he wanted to stay around we insisted he had to be evacuated. He really needed medical care. So he wasn't there. Dan Simpson was the chargé. We also (____) saw the patriarch with Dan. John then came back and became the assistant secretary six months later, probably less than six months later.

Q: Did, when you went to Syria, you were not talking to him. It was the feeling Assad was running everything.

NEWTON: Oh yes, he was running everything but Abdul Khalim Haddam had the Lebanon portfolio firmly in his hand, and he was there person to talk to. He was the person they designated for us to talk to. I don't recall that we, maybe we didn't meet Assad. I don't really remember. I just remember being shut up in this room for five days with this individual who is now in Paris and accusing the government of corruption and talking about democracy. Well, I don't think anybody was more expert at corruption. He had the reputation for being very corrupt but very significant thinker at the time.

Q: Was our reading at the time about Syrian Army and how it operated in Lebanon?

NEWTON: Well, it was an element of corruption. Also on the border there was a separate military road that crossed the border between Syria and Lebanon where things would pass without any customs. Since Syria had a controlled currency and so forth, sort of Eastern European-type system, people in the army and others made a lot of money shipping in refrigerators and all kinds of stuff in army trucks that would bypass the border. The Syrians had a couple of reasons for being in Lebanon. Number one Syria and Lebanon had in Ottoman times had been one country. The French were the protectors of the Christians, and they wanted the Christians and not Lebanon to have a separate country, but they expanded the borders to make it an economically viable state. And by expanding the borders, they made it half Muslim and half Christian. But they for example, they had a common central bank until the late '40s. They had the same currency and so forth. So the Syrians always felt, they had a special right or interest in Lebanon, besides the corruption issue, which was certainly there. The other one was strategic. They had fought two pretty bitter wars with the Israelis on the Golan Heights, and the terrain there favored the defense because it was so volcanic and so forth. But the Baka Valley offered a back door into Damascus. You could go up the valley northeast and then make a quick turn to the right, half turn to the right and just go up straight east into Damascus without really any, much of possibility of defense. That's what the French had done in the '20s. So the, that's why the Syrians resisted so hard any attempt to Israelize Lebanon, which the Israelis always hoped to be the case because it would outflank all their defenses on the Golan Heights and put them in a very weak position. If the next time the Israelis threatened them, the threat would be very real.

Q: Well, then you came back, what about, how stood we with Jordan? How did we feel one about King Hussein renouncing the West Bank, the West Bank?

NEWTON: Well, I don't know that, he did this rather hurriedly. I don't think, I think it did complicate our life. I wasn't there at the time he did it. It was a "fait accompli" (done deal) by the time I came. I don't think we made much of an issue of it. For the King it was getting to be too much of a burden. It did remove risks of confrontation between Israel and Jordan on the plus side.

Q: Did, was there much of an effort to, during the two years that you were there, to bring Jordan into the peace, to bring Jordan into a peace agreement with Israel at the time?

NEWTON: I think largely we followed King Hussein's lead in that because we had a very high regard for him as a leader in the Middle East. I knew, to think about it I don't think, I don't recall any major efforts at the time to, I mean we had very good relations with the king. I don't think we really thought much about, we were looking for a comprehensive peace agreement. We were not looking for a separate peace agreement. I know from my previous tour in Syria one of the problems was that the Palestinians were always afraid the Jordanians would jump first. The Syrians were afraid the Jordanians would jump first followed then by the Palestinians. So they all distrusted each other and the thing that the Syrians really feared, which was largely happened, is that they would be isolated. I mean they lost Egypt, and their fear was the Israelis could kind of strip away other opponents one at a time, and the Syrians would be the last in the line. When they got down to the front of the line, there wouldn't be anything left for them and their bargaining position would be very weak.

Q: Well, then after this trip to Lebanon what was your main, what was your main occupation, what was your main occupation there?

NEWTON: Oh the main occupation, I think we spent most of our time dealing with Lebanon. It became the, because of the break up of the country, General Aoun well, Gemayel appointed General Aoun as prime minister despite the fact that the constitution said that the prime minister had to be a Sunni Muslim. There had been one other time where this was broken. Selim al-Hoss the present prime minister continued. So you had two prime ministers. It started getting pretty violent again. General Aoun was given to violence. He was impulsive, and we had an issue then with the so-called illegal ports. There was a lot of smuggling going on. I always felt that if the Syrians and the Christians and the Lebanese Muslims could agree on anything, they could agree on drug smuggling. So there was a lot of that going on too. We told General Aoun, look, he demanded that the illegal ports be shut down and that because they were losing a lot of customs revenue and so forth. We said, "Look, we agree with you in principle. It should be done. But it should not be done with violence because this is like an ammunition factory," a fireworks factory. You start using violence and the place would blow. Well, he did. Now what he did, the worst possible thing. He shelled the Syrians in West Beirut, and the Syrians then began to plaster East Beirut and the Maronite areas, and then we got into the problem. General Aoun was making irresponsible statements, and we are already becoming worried. We had what in effect was the third largest militia in Lebanon protecting the embassy in the Christian area in (____). But there was a multi-ethnic militia. But they had already threatened a mutiny, and they had threatened our deputy security officer, assistant security officer, and then General Aoun was threatening them and holding demonstrations. So—

Q: What was the issue?

NEWTON: Just demanding that we support him basically against the Syrians. But he conducted a real public relations campaign so then the issue came up about the embassy. I wanted to close the embassy down but the ambassador was a friend of mine, John McCarthy but, and he wasn't happy with that. But I mean he couldn't, I would try to get him an okay from diplomatic security to go into West Beirut so we could talk with the Muslims. Every time we'd get to that point, inevitably some security threat, we'd pick up some security threat, and then he couldn't go. So we were out of contact completely with the Muslims in West Beirut. I just felt the security, the security threat is so great, not to close the embassy I shouldn't say, but I wanted a very major draw down. In the end, actually I worked on a memo to the secretary I remember, and the, and it, there were two options, a smaller draw down and a bigger draw down. But the smaller draw down was easier politically because we were always under a lot of pressure from the Maronite community here who wanted us to do more for the Christians, take their side. And we were trying to avoid taking sides. But the bigger option was also protected you politically because if something really had happened in the embassy you had a major draw down you would have fewer people killed, and if you didn't draw down that much, you might be politically vulnerable. Everybody agreed on the big draw down except it got to the secretary and came back, and he opted for the smaller draw down.

Q: (____)

NEWTON: I don't know. I think he was balancing the political, maybe assessing the danger, but he was balancing the political realities of both sides. I don't know if you would want to add that in, but I remember being a little miffed when it came back because I got a very nice little handwritten memo from Dennis Ross on that saying, "Wonderful memo. It was great. I really appreciated. Now can you change the memo take make the smaller drawer down the recommended course of action."

Q: Oh God.

NEWTON: That's the way (_____).

Q: Well, the secretary was—

NEWTON: Baker.

Q: I'm not quite sure, what was in it for us to stay around there?

NEWTON: Well, it was a, we didn't we felt we had a responsibility to try to control the violence and to find some kind of formula to end the civil war. In the end we had a lot of meetings, and I kept saying, we have to work with the Saudis. There's no choice. We have no real assets. We can't use military force. We don't have the kind of money it takes to convince these people. The Saudis have the money. We need to do that, and I remember, I think it was Dennis at one point saying, "Well, I don't, you're right. I don't see any other alternative." Then the Saudis came through. They took all the members of parliament down to Taif, which you remember, shut them up in a palace, wouldn't let them leave and gave them all money and fed them well and gave them gifts, but said you're not leaving until we fix this. So they came up with the Taif Accords, which then balanced the parliament and had, and reduced the powers of the president versus the prime minister. That did the trick. The problem was of course we could accomplish that, but we couldn't in the process get the Syrians out of Lebanon. That was just too much, couldn't be done. So we had to acquiesce, but we did get at least in the accords the Saudis got requirement the Syrians should leave (_____) leave in a year. They were supposed to begin withdrawing to the Baka, which they really didn't. But we couldn't really get them out, and the expectations the Syrians would honor the agreement of course was I think (_____) for us.

Q: Were the Israelis playing a disruptive game during all this?

NEWTON: No, I don't think so. I think they knew that this was our effort, and we were insistent on getting involved in it. The Egyptians wanted to be at least well informed and play a role, and when I went with Dick Murphy to Lebanon for that week, they were miffed because we didn't keep them briefed. But I mean we were, this was a situation we couldn't really do very much. So I had to go back a few weeks later to see Osama El-Baz and stroke him a bit and tell them we considered him to be very important because the Egyptians had a strong interest in Lebanon, but they no longer had any real leverage.

Q: Was Iran playing much of a role in those—

NEWTON: Not so much in those days. No, I don't. Doesn't come across to me that they were playing that much of a role. I mean, yes, they had, they were supporting the Shia offensive. I don't remember now in fact. It doesn't come back to me that they were, they were supplying military equipment and all that stuff. In any case, their support was aimed at Israel, aimed at getting the Shia to fight against the Israelis, not so much the political process, because the process was going their way and that the Muslims were getting more power.

Q: Did, was Iraq at all in this?

NEWTON: Yeah, Iraq was in this. Iraq had decided very cynically to support General Aoun and tried to ship weapons to him and we stopped them. Maybe the Israelis stopped them too.

Q: Was this the ship that was picked up going around—

NEWTON: Yeah, they tried to get in and we told the Syrians.

Q: I think Israelis picked them up.

NEWTON: Yeah, I think it was the Israelis, but we knew about it too, and it was easier for, but we were determined, and they were determined to not to let the Iraqis add fuel to the fire.

WALTER B. DEERING
Security Officer
Damascus (1988-1991)

Walter Deering was born and raised in New York and was educated at Hobart College and the University of Virginia. After service in the US Army in Counter Intelligence, he joined the State Department Bureau of Security in 1978 and worked in that Bureau in the US and abroad. His foreign assignments include Madrid, Damascus and Beirut, serving as Embassy Security Officer at those Embassies. In the United States Mr. Deering was posted to Field Offices in Los Angeles and Miami. In 2003 he was appointed Director of Field Operations of the State Department's Bureau of Security and served in that capacity until his retirement in 2004. Mr. Deering was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.

Q: Well now, in 1988 you're off to where?

DEERING: Off to Damascus.

Q: Into the belly of the beast as far as terrorism

DEERING: It's interesting. I go to Madrid for my first assignment; obviously it's not a hardship post. However, when you get there, the workload and everything else, what might not be a

hardship post certainly can create some hardship. I remember it was bidding time in the fall of 1987 and I said, "I took Spanish, doing all right with my Spanish, wrote my thesis on Latin America." Bid on, I think I bid on Ecuador, bid on Peru, I bid on something else, I don't know. Three or four assignments in Latin America and I didn't get any. So I remember getting a call from one of my, it was the surrogate call from the director, saying, "Well, Damascus has not been bid on yet. We strongly suggest that you consider Damascus." I said, "I've got Spanish, I want to go to Latin America." "None of the posts you want are available. We think you should consider Damascus. The alternatives are several African posts."

The time I got there, complete turnover in post management. A new ambassador...

Q: Who was the ambassador?

DEERING: Ed Djerejian. A new DCM, John Craig. New admin officer, at that time we were still reporting to the admin officer in the chain of command, Charlie Algeron. New political officer, David Litt. Charlie's wife, Kathy, was the number two political officer. New econ officer, there was a whole new team. Everybody's going in there at the same level of knowledge of what's going on in Damascus. Damascus had a history and there was a lot going on there. Again, to me, my biggest challenge was, number one, I had no assistant. One RSO. Had a shared secretary that didn't even come until like six months after we were there, shared with the admin officer. Had a local guard force that was locally contracted and paid by the embassy and the one guy that was hired to set up and run the guard force, he became my... Actually, he was a Syrian but he had U.S. citizenship because he married an American gal and went to the States for awhile and he spoke good English. But again, he had his own agenda, a lot of these people do and he had to, he was closely watched by the Syrian security apparatus because of his close ties. So he had to play both sides of the fence and I understood that but he could get me in to see the people I needed to see in the Syrian security apparatus. So that was the first thing I decided I had to do, I had to establish a relationship with the people that provided support for the embassy in case something went wrong, even though it's a country where, do they really care if anything goes wrong? Well, I found out, shortly after being there and I had excellent support from the admin, DCM and ambassador on setting up a security program. Guard orders had to be completely rewritten. The Emergency Action Plan was old and outdated. The first thing the ambassador said, "I want it up to date." Ed Djerejian was a very strong supporter of the security program at post. So it was a busy time, again and, unlike Spain there's not a lot of cultural things to do in Damascus, the oldest city in the Middle East – and basically it looked like it.

Probably the biggest regret I had was no opportunity for language training. So I had to depend on translation for dealing with my counterparts and there's always something lost there. You're never sure that the person that's representing you is translating things the way you wanted and you're not sure he's not watering down whatever's coming back.

But I worked to get and establish a relationship with the political security director, which was responsible for security issues and I did that early on. There was a General Gharib, who was the number two guy in the political security directorate. General Gharib was also a high school classmate of President Assad. So General Gharib pretty much did what General Gharib wanted to do. General Gharib had a wife who spoke French fluently and spoke some English. General

Gharib probably spoke a little bit of English but not much. But I could go to him and we developed a good working relationship over the time I was there, and I could to depend on him to come across with assistance when I needed it. Of course, one of the first things that happened after I got there was Pan Am 103.

Q: That's the one that fell down on Lockerbie.

DEERING: Fell down on Lockerbie. Of course, we received, when that happened, all the embassies, "Go, and talk to your locals. Make sure security is up." You know the old alert thing. I went and talked to him and of course then he wanted to speculate on who did this. Of course his theory was the Israelis did it. Which I expected his theory would be; all an Israeli plot. Why not, they have the capabilities to do it. But that was part of the game; it was part of the game. But, as I said, I developed a good working relationship with General Gharib and whenever I had the opportunity to go see him, I would. We'd sit and have coffee and it worked very well. He actually came to my house for some social events, which was unheard of among the Syrian security services, and through contacts in our embassy we determined that there was a great deal of discussion in other security elements as to what General Gharib was doing going to an American's house for a social event. Well, as I said, General Gharib didn't really care because he was a high school classmate of President Assad and he basically could do no wrong. And again, let's face it, if he's going and socializing with Americans, he's picking up information on what's going on, also. So it was all a gentleman's game there, it was. The Syrians by this time, this was 1988, it was apparent to Assad, I mean there's no doubt in my mind that his mentor was in trouble, the Soviet Union. He had his neighbor there in Baghdad, who he couldn't stand, Saddam Hussein. It was apparent that with the demise of the Soviet Union, Assad probably figured that out more quickly than a lot of other people in the region, that mentor was going to be gone and he was going to have to deal with the Americans. And basically the way it worked was, from the security point of view, word was out, literally and figuratively, that leave the Americans alone. They're here in our country, do not, **do not**, bother the Americans. So as long as we maintained our p's and q's there weren't any problems. There were a couple of incidents with an overzealous defense attaché's office where they were brought home with their tails between their feet.

Q: In other words, getting out rather aggressively?

DEERING: Rather aggressively going to some areas they shouldn't have gone into and being brought home and with a smirking foreign minister saying, "Here are your people. Now, tell them they shouldn't do things like that. They're lucky they didn't get into more trouble." But as we came, with the invasion of Kuwait and the relationship that then was developing with the Syrians and the necessity for the Syrians to be on board in 1991.

Q: They sent troops.

DEERING: They did and the ambassador did an outstanding job working with the Syrians, working to maintain that, maintain their presence in the alliance. Of course, Secretary of State Baker made many trips to Syria in the time between the invasion of Kuwait and the actual end of the war. He was there I believe a half a dozen times.

Q: So you were there from '88

DEERING: '88 to '91, I extended a year.

Q: So you covered the...

DEERING: It was an interesting time also because if you recall there were Americans who believed that because of their contacts in Lebanon back in the early and mid-Eighties that they were immune from the terrorists groups in Lebanon, all the ones who were captured. There were five or six, seven maybe American hostages from what's his name, Terry Anderson down to the poor guy who was selling bibles on the street. There was a move afoot to use the Syrians to get these people their freedom and they did. That started while I was there. Had several hostage releases where we went and picked them up at the foreign ministry and brought them out, back to the ambassador's residence. So that was an interesting time. But the lead up to the Gulf War, it was an experience I hadn't gone through before.

As I said, one of the things the ambassador wanted me to do right away was get our Emergency Action plan updated and the Emergency Action Plan is probably, now it's much easier to do because it's all, everything's computerized. But at that time, that was, I don't know how old it was but it was totally out of date. And you can't do one of those by yourself. You have to depend on everybody in the embassy who has any part of that thing to stop doing what they're doing or put some time aside to do that. And nobody likes to do that because it's just a pain in the neck, it really is. Of course the RSO is the one that gets stuck with putting the whole thing together. I remember, it was shortly after I got back from R&R, I was in the States when the invasion occurred. Actually, it was right before I left, a week before I left, because the ambassador had said in a country team meeting, "Walter, how's the EAP coming?" I said, "Sir, I've done everything I can. There's a couple of sections I'm still waiting on." Well, Ambassador Djerejian, much to my liking, he just sat there and he said, "Okay, I don't know who hasn't done their sections but I will ask Walter after this meeting who hasn't done their sections and if they're not done within the next week I don't care who you are or what your job is or who is supposed to be doing it for you, but if it's not done, you are going home." Now, it was done, it got done and it was done in a timely manner because it had a lot of evacuation stuff. We had teams coming in to look at our evacuation routes and everything else. And it was done prior to the outbreak of the Gulf War. We were the first one to have an updated plan in the Middle East.

Again, having the support of the people that you're working for in the security job is extremely important because it is, it's a tough job and if you're doing your job it makes life difficult sometimes for some other people. We had the same kind of things there. Security violations, problems with the marines and problems with other things and everyday life. However, there was no crime.

Q: Tell me, when you arrived there, I think at that point our embassy in Beirut had been blown up twice, I guess and barracks had been blown up.

DEERING: It was closed. The embassy was closed.

Q: Yeah, but I'm saying, was there any concern that somehow or another our embassy in Damascus might be a target?

DEERING: Oh, sure. Number one; there was no stand back from the street. The embassy came right up to the street. We did the best we could to upgrade the security. There had been a couple instances where the students had climbed up on the roof of the embassy. There were a couple demonstrations before I'd gotten there. That was how the Syrian security services let their people vent their anger at our support of the Israelis. It was orchestrated and in fact, as you may recall, not too many years ago, the ambassador's wife was trapped in the safe haven of the embassy residence there when the embassy residence was trashed. No, there was always that concern, what if? But what if in Damascus was not what if the embassy had blown up. Everything was predicated on what if Hafez Assad had died. What if we wake up in the morning and the previous night Hafez Assad passed away? That was the big "What If", because like so many of the dictatorships in the region, much like Iraq, certainly, the leadership was a minority. The Alawites, 15 per cent of the population in Syria, ruled by terror. In 1982, when Hama, the Potemkin village that's there now. What happened there, I learned a lot of this actually from my contact there, General Gharib. He gave me a lot of history lessons on what happened in Syria. But interestingly enough one of the things when I first got there, Spain was just full of mopeds, motorbikes, little motorcycles. When I left Spain, one of the things, when I got to Syria, I noticed, what's missing? Old cars, like the 1950's and Sixties but I said something's missing here. There were no motorcycles, no motorbikes, no mopeds. What I found out, what I learned subsequently was that as a result of the Muslim Brotherhood's activities in the early Eighties, in their attempt to get rid of Assad, which resulted in the army destroying Hama, the mode of delivery for a lot of the attacks were satchel charges thrown at government buildings from motorcycles, motorbikes. So, how do you resolve that problem? You just outlaw motorbikes and that's what he did. So when I was there you'd see all the rich kids driving around in Mercedes, fancy cars from the States, Porsches and stuff, they'd parade up and down the main drag there. No motorcycles, no motorbikes, at the very end, a couple of them. But what happened was there was a government meeting that outlawed motorbikes because they were only used to, they were a threat to the regime. So, again, the fear was, not will the American Embassy be attacked by terrorists but what will happen if President Assad dies suddenly. And he was rumored to be sick for years and years and years before he finally died, with all kinds of diseases. So our Emergency Action Plan was more predicated on the scenario of tanks rolling in the streets, of an uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood if Assad were to die and there would be confusion. The fact is that the ruling minority occupied all the major positions of influence, but the masses were the Sunnis. So that was our scenario. Everything was based on, how we going to shut down, what are we going to do if that happens. It never happened and it was probably overplayed because when it did happen...

Q: But that's not your job. Your job is to figure out a worst case scenario.

DEERING: And that was the worst case scenario. That's what we always talked about, what happens if? Because, as I said, as we all, the new team, got there, most of these folks were Arabists, anyhow, so they understood a lot more than I did at the time, what the politics of the Middle East were. The point being it became readily apparent that the Syrians were interested in

our wellbeing. They were not interested in our becoming targets of opportunity for any group in Syria. And I mentioned earlier, I think, at some point in time, crime was not a problem. You could leave your doors unlocked.

In fact, I lived on al-Malki, which was the main drag that came up to where the president's residence was and the embassy down another side street there. President Assad would go out every month or so too early, he'd go to the mosque early in the morning for various things but only for special occasions. And if that happened, again, they didn't have the resources to check cars and everything else. So what they did was, what the Syrians did was, any street where the motorcade was going to go by, the cars had to be gone. Now they might announce at ten o'clock in the evening that three or five o'clock in the morning the streets had to be cleared, but I'm not going to know that. I would get, sometimes eleven o'clock at night, I'd get a very polite knock on the door and it would be Syrian security saying, "Your car has to be off the street. Go park it around the side." If something happened and I wasn't notified, I'd know that there'd been a presidential motorcade because I'd find my car pulled around the street. That happened once or twice. They were very polite about it.

Of course, the point also was that the Soviet Union was their mentor and the East German embassy was right next to my house. It was kind of interesting to see the changes there as the Soviet Union fell. They became friendly. They would say hello to me.

It became apparent that the scenario we had to work on was who's going to get revenge on us after Assad goes? Are we going to become the targets of these groups who are just going to go striking out at people? How the Syrians did their security was quite simple. Everyone was an informant. Sixty per cent of the taxi drivers were informants. If you walked home from the embassy, which I did often, it was only a five or ten minute walk, on every street corner was Syrian security in their jeans and leather jackets and they would just report on your movements as you walked by. And you know what? I didn't have to worry about anything. So that was what was going on.

Now we had other concerns. We had an American school there, which was right across the street from the air force headquarters, the Syrian air force, which was one of the more hard-handed intelligence units there. If you remember old what's his name, Colonel North, at one point in time suggested to the president that they take out the Syrian air headquarters, some time back I believe that was and the American school was right next to that. But I became involved on the school board and activities with the kids at school, was president of the school board the last year I was there, which also was enlightening, because the majority of the population at the school were Syrians and they had to have permission from the foreign ministry for their sons or daughters to attend the school there. So you had all kinds there.

The other interesting thing was the Sheraton Hotel, the restaurant and the British pub, we used to go there for entertainment and of course you could see anybody there. It was like the old, I like to think of it as, remember the bar scene in Star Wars, where you had all these different things sitting around the table?

Q: From alien worlds.

DEERING: Right, right. That was it. Different people were terrorists, known terrorists. People were there, you rubbed shoulders with them. You'd sit there but, again, it was hands off the Americans.

Q: Were you tasked, or were the other agencies, with keeping an eye out for terrorist organizations that were reputed, purportedly kept in Syria?

DEERING: Oh, sure, I always kept my ears open. I had a very, what I considered to be an aggressive, counterintelligence awareness program at post. You had to understand, of course, that blood is thicker than water and the Syrians who worked at the embassy they were all subjected to being called in, frequently, depending on what position they had at the embassy, to report on who they were working for and what was going on. So my intent was, let's work the positive side of this. And I would have meetings with the local staff. Security awareness meetings, I would call them, but would cover the whole gamut. And I would be upfront with them. And I said, "Look, I understand. You have a problem here. The society you work in requires that you cooperate with your friendly local security service. Quite frankly, I don't have a problem with that, because you have to do what you have to do. The problem I have is, if I find out through my other, my own sources that you may be crossing the line a little bit and jeopardizing the welfare of our people and the security of our facilities to include your own, then we're going to have a little talk." Well then I get the people who would come in and start telling me meetings they got called into. Then I get those who never came in at all. And you know who I was concerned about? The ones that came in and talked to me, more than the ones who didn't. So that was my little game there but of course that had its downside, too, because then I became known to the services as being aggressive myself. I remember towards the end of my tour the ambassador called me into his office. "Walter, we got a little problem." Kind of a smile on his face. The DCM was there also. I said, "What's going on?" "I just got back from the foreign ministry and the foreign ministry tells me that one of the services wants you out of the country. So keep up the good work." So, little anecdotes like that made up for, hey, you're doing your job; you're doing your job.

Q: Well, what happened immediately when Kuwait was invaded and the aftermath?

DEERING: I was out of the country. I was on R&R. I called up and said, "You want me right now?" They said, "No, finish your R&R. Then be prepared to go to work when you get back." I went back and we had to prepare for, we had to go through the phases, the meetings. Do we shut down the embassy; do we shut down certain things? How do we deal with the teachers, the American teachers? How do we deal with the few American businesses that are here? That was all part of the planning process but we kept well ahead of the game and ultimately we didn't, we never went to a mandatory evacuation. We had a voluntary, where all family members left. No family members stayed behind. Shortly after the end of the ground war the option was reopened fairly quickly for the family members to come back in. It did affect the school. My kids, my wife and I were separated at the time, the kids were with me and they had to leave and go back to the States, with their mom. Fortunately she had established a residence there so actually it worked out better than it could have from that perspective. But we did, I think, within three days, two days, of the commencement of hostilities we evacuated the last of the people who had held out

until then. Right up until the end I think we all knew what was coming but maybe at the last minute old Saddam would change his mind. He didn't. We were never put in the position; it was never an evacuation under duress. It was with the full cooperation of the Syrian authorities.

Q: Was there any concern about Scuds? Syria sent the equivalent to a division, didn't they or something there?

DEERING: No, we didn't, we never felt, I remember we went through this exercise early on of where, what are we going to do for our people? Are we going to get these specialized gas masks and suits and everything else? I believe, as I recall, there was some stuff that was sent over and put in warehouse. So my argument was if it makes everybody feel better, fine. But I said, "Let's face it, unless you got this thing with you all the time, it's not going to do you much good." And then it was also this thing just like here, go out and buy duct tape and seal your windows and I'm going, what is wrong with you? Let's get a grasp here. I did get called to come meet with them, the Germans and the French. The Brits weren't back yet. The Germans, the French, the Italians, the Australians, the Canadians. "What are you doing, what are you doing for your people? We've got all this stuff here but we don't know how. Can you train?" "No, I'm not a trainer on this stuff. My advice is tell the people it's there and we can get it if we need it." That was kind of, to me, not a realistic approach to the problem. I don't think we had the fear of the Scuds like they did in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and others because, why would he waste the Scuds on Damascus? Ultimately he's going to have to make nice with Damascus again. Are you going to waste your weaponry, which was limited already, on a neighboring Arab capital? That was never really a thought. Now, a wayward Scud perhaps that went over or something like that?

Q: Could be, because they weren't very accurate.

DEERING: No, but again, remember, there was no love lost between Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein and I think ultimately Hafez Assad had given the green light for a lot more to happen than we ever knew about, in terms of how things were to be done.

Q: Did you get requests or attempts to find out about terrorists who were located in Syria? Was Syria the host to terrorist groups?

DEERING: Syria was the R&R location for Middle East terrorists. Training, R&R. There were several that were residing in Damascus, including our friend, Carlos. Also the Bhutto family. Mir Murtaza Bhutto, who was the brother of the prime minister, educated in the United States, had a daughter born in the United States. However, he was the architect of the revenge plot against those who killed his father and he was responsible for the hijacking of some aircraft, so he was on our list. His daughter attended the American school, Damascus Community School, played with the ambassador's daughter. Very well spoken, articulate person, educated in the Ivy League. Sat next to him at dinner several times, met with him. His wife, who he finally married, was Lebanese. When he lived in the States, his wife, there was some conspiracy thing, they tried to have him kill his wife. He ultimately married this Lebanese lady who had been taking care of his children by the previous wife and they lived in Damascus. I remember, again, this was 1989 because my wife was still there, she went out to lunch with a group of ladies including some from the embassy and Mir Bhutto's wife, and Mrs. Bhutto invited them all home for tea after

they all went to I think a Turkish bath or something in Damascus, I don't remember exactly what it was. But my wife came back and said, "It's very strange. We went to her house, completely surrounded by Syrian security who let us in to the compound area there and we went up, very nice apartment, big Damascene apartment, fireplace. I'm leaning on the mantelpiece of the fireplace and I look and there is a picture of Muammar Qadhafi, signed, 'To Mir with fondness, Muammar'." Also in that compound were rumored to be Carlos the Jackal and the head of the PFLP-GC, the General Command, the Syrian captain, I can't think of his name, his son was just killed by somebody in Lebanon, an assassination but the well-known leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, back in the Eighties and Nineties. So it was a hodge podge. These people there, they were there under the watchful eyes of the Syrians.

But again, the thing that the Syrians most feared was the Muslim Brotherhood, still and there were still cells of Muslim Brotherhood operating throughout Damascus. I remember one of my first nights there with the kids we were in the kitchen and again I looked down over my balcony. We were eating dinner and all a sudden there were gunshots, right outside the window. I said, "Down!" Everyone went down. It passed by. The explanation was that the Syrian security services were chasing some smugglers, smugglers down Malki Avenue, shooting at them. Explanation from other sources was that this was Muslim Brotherhood, they had gotten involved in something that went bad and they were being chased. There were certain individuals who I had some faith in that were members of the local staff in Damascus that lived up in the hills around Damascus in areas where there was a heavy security presence but there was also rumored to be operating cells of the Muslim Brotherhood. And they told me, you'd hear about an incident somewhere or something happening and the government would say it was just another problem with smugglers, where there were shootouts in neighborhoods between Muslim Brotherhood folks and the Syrian security services. And I would get eyewitness reports from the locals on these incidents and then I would report those back through my channels and through other channels when I got this information.

Q: Did you get any, were you at all concerned or got involved at all in the fact that the Syrians had a sizeable number of troops in Lebanon? Did that spill over into your area?

DEERING: What happened was, we had an office set up in the embassy in Damascus, a political officer, the Lebanese desk officer who was actually working in Syria part of the time, Dave Satterfield, who's now, who was my ambassador when I was in Beirut and he's now, I guess he's in Jordan as the ambassador. But he was the, he was the political officer reporting. He was in Damascus for about a year.

Q: We didn't have, our embassy...

DEERING: We opened up while we were there. Went in several times, had the RSO come in through Damascus to go and set up in Lebanon. I'm trying to remember exactly when we reopened in Lebanon. Was it '89 or '90? The biggest problem was the Lebanese would have to come to Damascus to get visas, so that opened up all kinds of accusations of corruption, everything else. The biggest problem for us with the Lebanese was that we were accused of selling out to the Syrians, getting them to be on our side in the Gulf War and in return letting them go and clean up Lebanon. They bombed the presidential palace and moved the troops in

and occupied Lebanon, where they are, to some extent, today. So anyhow Lebanon was just opening up again I guess and I don't remember what, '89 or '90 or '91 when we finally reopened. We closed down Lebanon, started to open up and closed down again when the Gulf War started, I believe. A lot of concern for reopening, I don't recall but again the biggest problem for us in Syria was the fact that the Lebanese had no place to go but Damascus for visas and that created some problems.

Q: What kind of problems?

DEERING: Well, in the visa lines. There was a line for Syrians and a line for Lebanese. We would get, favors were done for people and as a result word got out on the grapevine that there was corruption in Embassy Damascus and these people for whom favors were done would go back and say, "I've got a contact here for you at the embassy." They in fact did have a contact at the embassy but it created a situation where I spent, again, a fair amount of time sorting through this stuff. There was several occasions where I had to have people come over. I was by myself, during this whole time, I had teams come from Washington to look into some of these allegations.

Q: Well, were you able to take care of the problem?

DEERING: Yeah, we took care of the problem. There was no visa fraud per se within the consulate. It was, again, the way business was done. That had to be changed.

Q: Yeah. Did the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that, did you pick up any, this was not expected, really, but once this happened obviously, Gorbachev, things were changing, as you mentioned, you first got there but did that itself, all of a sudden, the change there and Eastern Europe, did you feel any reflections of that where you were?

DEERING: There was certainly a good open working relationship between the embassy, the Russian embassy in Damascus and the American embassy in Damascus. The ambassadors met frequently back and forth between the two embassies. In fact I remember the Russian ambassador liked to play basketball, came over and he'd play basketball, because we had a basketball court at the American school. There was a lot of consultations as I recall in the period leading up to the Gulf War because even then the Russians were supportive of what was going on, in particular. But I didn't, I got the sense that there was more of an openness. Like I said, here were the East German consulate or embassy right next door to where I lived, never knew what was going on there. Then all of a sudden, these people come out and start saying hello to me like I was a long lost friend. And then they shut it down, just shut down. The Germans came in and they went through it with a fine tooth comb.

Q: Well, of course, the East Germans were renowned throughout, certainly Libya and I suppose Syria, of being the best police type, I mean, we're talking about ...

DEERING: Best intelligence services. Of course the Soviets were their mentors.

Q: Yeah but they did the Soviets one up.

DEERING: There was that rumor and I always wondered what was going on in that building next door to me and what are they shooting at the wall of my building. It was an atmosphere, I never felt, I never felt threatened in Damascus. I never felt that Americans were going to be bothered by anyone there, unless we were way out of line in some of those things we were doing. I felt that, as I said it was early on that the Syrians had decided that they were going to take care of us as resident diplomats in their country. There was always a fear of another incident where, if the Syrian population was thinking that the Syrians were selling out to Americans over the whole Israeli thing, then they'd let them vent, there'd be demonstrations and there was a fear of intent to occupy the embassy again like they did previously. So we upgraded some of the security so they couldn't climb over the walls like they did once before, although they succeeded in doing it again. But again, I never got the sense of hostility. The Syrian people, of course I didn't get out into the camps that were around, the Palestinian camps that were, Yarmouk I think was outside of Damascus, and I didn't get down into the grassroots of the Syrian population, the very poor people. However, in going through the old markets, through the restaurants, through the shops, at various places, I never found any hostility, I did not experience any hostility. I never had anybody hissing or spitting. They were generally interested in talking to Americans. What was amazing was after the Gulf War was over, when Secretary Baker came over, he took a tour of the Old City and he was applauded as he walked through the Old City, he was applauded by the Syrian people, en masse. So what the indication was that, again, the regime represented 15 per cent of the population. The hostility that existed at the regime level, I still believe the differences are what our governments believe, not among the people. Again, the way I tried to work was, give everybody a fair shot, give everybody a fair chance and a lot easier to deal with people if you were working at an honest level.

Q: Did you have any contact with the Syrian-American population? Say in Boston. There's a sizeable Syrian-American population in the United States.

DEERING: No, I really didn't. I haven't, unlike, as we get on, I have been maintaining contact with Lebanese people. No, I really didn't have much contact with Syrians in the United States nor have I since I left.

Q: I was wondering whether they ...

DEERING: Oh, a lot of them had relatives in the States. There were also travel restrictions on the Syrians still. You had to get permission to travel to the United States. So those who had contacts with the regime, they could come and go pretty much as they pleased. Again, I say the so-called elite Syrian population. The ones who could afford to pay to send their kids to the American School. They were the businessmen, they were the wheelers and dealers in society. The ones who knew how to play both sides. Was that really the true, that's not the real ...

Q: It's a different ...

DEERING: It's a different world. And I remember, there were a couple incidents. Word gets out as to who you are and what you are. Twice I found notes slid under my door on my way to work in the morning at my apartment. It was all in Arabic. I couldn't read Arabic. I'd take them in and

have them translated at the embassy and there were women, trying to get me to take their children. I had a couple of times there'd be knocks on the door and there would be the Bedouins, Bedouin women with the tattoos. Open my door and they would try literally to hand me their babies. I'd have to push them away. So, like I say, what America represents to different people is different things but criticism of our government, criticism of some of the things we do, it's all fine and good and that's part of the game. Boy, I tell you, there isn't a place yet where I've been where the people don't want to come and see America and what America is.

LUKE KAY
Language Student
Syria (1993)

Luke Kay was born in Greece in 1969. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan in 1991 and attended the School of International Studies, Bologna. After joining the Foreign Service in 1998 he has held positions in Brazil, Ethiopia, and Uruguay. Mr. Kay was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in June 2004.

Q: When you got to Syria, how did you find that?

KAY: It was fabulous, almost like stepping back in time. At the time it was on the black list by the State Department. In fact, it just went on the black list. I mean, it has ancient history and remains an excellent place to learn Arabic because no one speaks any other language, so you must sink or swim. You had this feeling like it was like a "wild west" of the Middle East, because it was partly socialist, a former Soviet client state, a pariah state in one extent or the other. Just a fabulous place. The people were wonderful, wonderful.

Q: You say the people were wonderful. Did you stay with a family?

KAY: No, after the first few nights in a hotel, basically I got a little apartment a one bedroom by myself near the historic center.

Q: Was this part of the SAIS program?

KAY: It was. I had a scholarship by SAIS to study Arabic in Syria. The school itself was like a language institute. As I mentioned, all the students at SAIS, all the Arabic-language students, had a scholarship to study in the summer in the Arabic country of their choice.

Q: Did you get much exposure to the politics in Syria?

KAY: A little bit before I went. Once you're in Syria, you cannot discuss politics. It's a no-no, a taboo in their society.

Q: How about meeting Syrian families?

KAY: Oh, they were wonderful, wonderful people. They love Americans, they love foreigners. They had so few foreigners that they would really be like children, so naive to the ways of the outside world; innocent, so to speak, to the outside world.

Q: How about with the young people. Were they aware of the introduction of the computer, the internet, and other things?

KAY: Yes. Mind you, back then it was '92 which was before the internet, even in the U.S. In some respects, society was just as modern as the U.S. Like now you can go out to pizza parlors and cafes. There were no bars, mind you--or very, very few of them--because Syria is predominantly Muslim, so most people there don't drink, at least not publicly. But because it has a Socialist government, Islam as a religious force was also out of the question. Syria had a socialist, secular society. But going out in the evenings it would be very much like the U.S. Girls would dress up to impress the boys, and the boys would cruise by to impress the girls. People are people anywhere, despite what Bush and Cheney might say!

MARJORIE RANSOM
Public Affairs Officer/Deputy Chief of Mission
Damascus (1995-1997)

Marjorie Ransom was born in New York in 1938. She received her bachelor's degree from Trinity University in 1959 and her master's degree from Columbia University in 1962. Her career includes positions in Jordan, India, Iran, Yemen, Washington D.C., Abu Dhabi, Syria, and Egypt. Mrs. Ransom was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in December 2000.

Q: Today is July 5, 2001. Marjorie, we're in Syria in '95. You were in Syria until when?

RANSOM: 1995-1997.

Q: 1995. What was the state of relations between Syria and the U.S. at that time?

RANSOM: Relations were terrible. They weren't that different in 1995 except perhaps for the increased activity in the peace process.

Q: How did we see the government of Syria at that point?

Who was the ambassador?

RANSOM: Chris Ross.

Q: 1995. What was the state of relations there?

RANSOM: Even looking back to my previous tour in Syria, the relationship was not good, but we were engaged intensely in the peace process. Our exchanges with the Syrian government were extensive, but confined almost 100% to the peace process and to terrorism and to other difficult subjects. The relationship was a very difficult one.

Q: Hafez Assad was still the President?

RANSOM: Hafez was absolutely the President. We engaged in what we called a “death watch.” But he was pretty tough. He was quite active in those days. Over the course of two years, we might have seen him slow down somewhat. But he was very much running things and certainly running peace negotiations.

Q: What was the wisdom of the period on who was going to replace him?

RANSOM: At that time, it wasn’t clear. They were just starting to groom Bushar after Basel died the year before I got there. They withdrew Bushar from England. He was studying to be an ophthalmologist. They brought him back and started grooming him in different jobs. It became apparent that they were testing him to prepare him for leadership. They were doing it in a rather gradual way. They thought they had a few years to do so.

Q: Had Assad’s oldest son died?

RANSOM: Assad’s oldest son Basil died in an automobile crash racing in his sports car to the airport. Not a very noble end. Nevertheless, he was elevated to some sort of martyrdom after his death and became one off... We watched in Syria the change in the pictures that would appear around town of Assad. There were many pictures of Basil and then there was some gradual transition to a trilogy. You would have a picture of Assad, the dead son Basil, and the upstart Bushar.

Q: While you were there, what was the ruling of Bushar?

RANSOM: The word was that he was a very nice guy and perhaps lacked the steel will, and so-called “killer eyes,” of his late brother, Basil, and his younger brother Maher. He was considered smart, having been educated in England. He spoke English fluently, was quite westernized, and expressed interest in opening up Syrian society to the outside world. He was instrumental in starting a computer society and tried before he became president to put Syria on the Internet, but the security services got in his way at that time. He was viewed as a very nice person, but people doubted his ability to lead Syria, considering the strength of the security services and the military.

Q: Were the security services and the military pretty well dominated by the Alawis?

RANSOM: The Alawis are 11-12% of the population and they definitely dominated the security and the military, along with a small number of Christians and a very few select Sunnis. The Alawis dominated throughout the security and the military.

Q: What about terrorism? Syria has been fingered for decades as being the center of terrorist training and asylum for terrorists.

RANSOM: Syria had been very careful since the incidents of the late '80s to not have their fingerprints directly on terrorism acts, but certain dissident groups continued to meet in Damascus openly and freely. There were Palestinian groups, the DLFP and three or four others, and they also were supportive at that time of the Kurdish leader Ocalan's PKK. They continued to appear on our terrorism list. We delivered messages from time to time, expressing our dissatisfaction with specific Syrian support for these groups. But our protests fell on deaf ears.

Q: What was in it for the Syrians in supporting these groups?

RANSOM: Syria is a very weak country, surrounded by enemies. Not only did they feel that Israel and we were their enemies, but they couldn't get along with Turkey, with Iraq... They had problems with Jordan. They weren't getting along with the Palestinians. Even their relationship with Lebanon, where a large number of their troops were stationed, was a difficult one. Iran was one of their few allies, so what could they use for leverage? Also, you have to remember that with the breakup of the Soviet Union, they lost the Soviet support that they had relied on earlier. So, they were using all the cards they could get. Certainly they felt that with Turkey, their support for Ocalan was one of their strongest cards. They felt that they could use other groups to make Israel's life difficult. They could even rely on these groups to create problems in other areas in the Middle East. So, it was one of Assad's few cards that he had to play.

Q: Did you have the feeling that Assad was ever considering playing the U.S. card? The U.S. has been pretty friendly with Jordan. If Iraq was an enemy, the U.S.... There would seem to be some room for Syria to maybe be opposed to Israel, but to get more friendly with the U.S.

RANSOM: I'm sure that we had discussions with them about Iraq at certain times, but their willingness to cooperate was always quite limited.

Q: How free were we to operate within Syria?

RANSOM: In what sense?

Q: Could you travel around? Could we go to Aleppo?

RANSOM: Compared to life in Iraq when we still had relations with them, we had considerable freedom in Syria. We could travel anywhere. It was amazing. You could travel anywhere except to a military base and even then you could get quite close to their military installations. You had to be very careful if you were going to take a picture. There was a requirement on the books that the Ambassador and the DCM give travel plans in advance to the Foreign Ministry, but it was never enforced. The only person who suffered any serious restrictions and was followed was the Military Attaché. Other than that, we had considerable freedom. Our houses were watched. The Syrians certainly knew who came and went from

our houses, but they at least in the '90s – especially as we were engaged in the peace process – did not make it difficult for people to see us or to enter our houses.

Q: During this time, your husband was Ambassador to Bahrain.

Let's talk about the peace process. What was going on from '95-'97 and what was our Embassy role?

RANSOM: When I went to Syria in 1995, the Embassy was heavily engaged in the peace process. Over the course of that first year, I was involved in six visits from Secretary Christopher trying to push forward a separate Syrian-Israeli peace treaty. Even though Chris Ross attended the meetings, I always had the impression that his participation in discussions on how to move forward, his ability to contribute ideas, was severely limited. He was in on the meetings because he was Ambassador. He played a valuable role in briefing the peace team on what the intent of the Syrians was, what their present mood was, what their options were. He also played a similar role with the Syrians after the departure of the peace team. He was a very good interpreter of U.S. intentions and desires in the peace process for the Syrians. But the peace process itself, the negotiations, were held very closely by Dennis Ross; his deputy, Aaron Miller; and Mark Parris. It was interesting to me, incredulous to me, that Bob Pelletreau, who came on one of the early trips with the Secretary, did not attend the meetings.

Q: One of the complaints I heard about the Clinton team was (1) that it consisted mainly or completely of people of Jewish ancestry, which rightly or wrongly sent a message to the Arabs that this was a team that was loaded and (2) that in the State Department, the word was put out that no Arabist was wanted. "We will take care of the peace process and the rest of you go off and do whatever you have to do."

RANSOM: My impression in Syria was that Chris Ross, who was one of our best Arabists in the Department, who had long years of experience in the area, played a very limited role in the actual negotiation process. He certainly showed his stuff in his ability to act as an interlocutor for both sides. He also served his country brilliantly in the way he would smooth over the U.S.-Syrian relationship. He spent a good part of his time trying to explain to the Syrians how decisions are made in the U.S. and tried to assuage their fears that the whole process was in the hands of a group of Americans of Jewish extraction who were overly sympathetic to Israel. But as far as a long-term contribution to the intricacies to the actual facts of the peace process, I didn't see it. I think that was unfortunate.

Q: Was there any feeling that maybe this peace process was going to work?

RANSOM: I felt that we were very close before Rabin was assassinated. We had an ongoing debate in Damascus over Assad's true intent, whether he was using the peace process for his own designs to augment his position in the area, to strengthen his hand diplomatically, or whether he really intended to make peace. We became convinced that he was sincere. He was preparing the Syrian people for peace. You would see billboards on the road coming in from the airport talking about Assad the Peacemaker. We felt that there was a real hope. We felt

that it would be very difficult for Assad to take less than his stated public position on where the border would be drawn and the specifics of a treaty with Israel and perhaps he painted himself into a corner that way. But we felt his intent was real and that was something dramatically new in Syria.

Q: Was there the feeling that Syria's interest was really pretty much on the border along the Golan Heights as opposed to support for the Palestinian cause?

RANSOM: Oh, my goodness, yes. One only had to visit Quneitra to get a feeling of Assad's feeling about the peace process. The place was left blown up the way the Israelis left it when they withdrew as a result of the Kissinger shuttle. He made it a point of pride that he was going to recover the Golan Heights for Syria. It was absolutely his first and ultimate goal. He might have from time to time paid lip service to the Palestinians, but his outlook was totally to get Syria back what they lost and to regain the prestige that it lost in its wars with Israel.

Q: Did you see Syria willing to accept some surveillance on the Golan Heights? Everybody who goes there sees lookout towers and antennae looking over the area.

RANSOM: There were a lot of discussions about what would count as surveillance, if the Israelis withdrew their listening posts, what would be acceptable to both sides? There was progress in the discussions. They hadn't ironed out every last problem and crossed every "t," but they were very close.

Q: It seemed to boil down to a small area of some farm?

RANSOM: It's a matter of the shore of Lake Tiberius and where you draw the border. The Syrians wanted their border to go right up to Lake Tiberius. The Israelis were so dependent on Lake Tiberius for water that they were unwilling to countenance that. Then, there was a discussion about the width of the border in-between. I say all this because I had this information secondhand. If Chris Ross was not a full participant in the peace process, I myself often felt like I was more of a bystander, totally occupied with the details of supporting the trips and making sure that all the mechanics went well, but not in any way a participant to these sensitive and complex discussions. It was frustrating.

Q: Making your preparations, how did the State Department crew act? Were they fairly easy to deal with?

RANSOM: I thought the Secretary was easy to deal with. The peace team often came without the Secretary. It was sometimes complicated, getting them in and out easily, but they were very decent people to deal with. The problem with the Secretary when he travels – and I have said this until I'm purple in the face – is the size of the delegation. It was so unnecessary to have all those people along. Of course, everyone was very caught up in the peace process and it was very sexy and glamorous to be part of the entourage. Our best attempts to reduce the numbers met with total failure. If you had six visits in one year, you kind of got to know the drill. The officers in the embassy were much better equipped than the 13th officer from the watch to handle all those details. But it made no difference. Actually, when the team

themselves came, they traveled fairly lightly. Usually they would fly in commercially or, if they had a plane, it wasn't too difficult, as long as there weren't last minute changes in meetings that would complicate things. The Syrians were cooperative and I didn't find the Americans difficult.

Q: Were you there when Rabin was shot?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: What was the reaction?

RANSOM: Just horror. We had a CNN correspondent who was with us at an embassy dinner when we first got the news. The Syrians were very upset and were very concerned about what it would do to the peace process. We tried valiantly to have the Syrian government give some indication, some sense of this loss, to express condolences – anything, the tiniest gesture after this tragic loss. We just couldn't get them to do it. I see that as Assad's failure as a leader. Something that small, he just couldn't do it. We wanted him to express some sympathy to the widow. He just wouldn't do it. That would have sent an extraordinary message to the Israeli people. And, the fact that he didn't do it sent a very negative impression.

Q: King Hussein came and spoke at the funeral. What about relations with Jordan?

RANSOM: Relations with Jordan at that time were very bad. I know from my reading that they've improved dramatically.

Q: Why were they so bad? Was it a chemistry?

RANSOM: I think part of it is chemistry. Part of it is a history of bad blood between the two countries. They just couldn't cooperate together. I think the fact that Assad traveled so little was a great hindrance in his relations with other Arab rulers. He did get along fairly well with Mubarak. That was a wonder in itself.

Q: Relations with Iraq at this time?

RANSOM: Very bad. The history of the relationship with Saddam Hussein was very bad and the problems in the Baath Party early on were very bad. When we lived there in the '80s, the Iraqis were supposedly behind a series of seven or eight bombings that took place in different parts of Syria. The Syrian government eventually strung up some guys that they said were from Iraq. Don't forget the role that Syria played in the Gulf War, going in with Egypt.

Q: With Turkey... You were saying relations were bad. Why were they bad?

RANSOM: A major problem was water. The Turks had built a number of dams, two of them quite large, north of Syria that were there when we were there – and of course it's gotten much worse – reducing the amount of water flowing into Syria. There is a water committee

made up of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey that would meet periodically to discuss the water issue, but they never were able to come up with any satisfactory agreement on water distribution. The Iraqis suffered every bit as much as the Syrians from the Turkish dams. The Turks made some proposals at that time that seemed fairly reasonable. They were at least interesting. But the Syrian reaction was quite negative.

Q: Did we have any programs going in water development?

RANSOM: We had no aid program in Syria and very interest in promoting economic development in Syria.

Q: How about exchanges?

RANSOM: The Syrian government had made the decision long before I was there my first time that exchanges with the American people were something desirable. They were supportive of almost any program that USIS would recommend. They partially funded scholarships for Syrian graduate study in the U.S. We would pay for Master's degrees and they would pay for Ph.D.'s. While the rest of the embassy had very limited contact with Syrian government ministries, USIS could deal freely with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, and the universities – almost anything that fell into their bailiwick.

Q: What happened to the graduates that came back to Syria? Did they have to keep a pretty discreet presence?

RANSOM: A Syrian who studied in the U.S. was a hot ticket item when he came back to Syria. He was given a prominent place in the university. The difficulty these graduates faced when they came back was the lack of resources, the huge size of the classes they were expected to teach, and the outrageously low salaries they were paid. They simply couldn't live on the wages. In the '70s, after the Kissinger shuttle when we reestablished relations and wanted to show our goodwill towards the Syrians, we gave through AID 50 Ph.D. scholarships to Syria. When I was there in the '80s, maybe 49 out of the 50 came back, which I found amazing. But when I was there this time, I looked for those graduates and I could only find five or six. The rest had all left. It really was because they couldn't do their job. They felt they couldn't teach with the lack of resources and the lack of ability to keep up with their field in the U.S.-and also the terribly low salaries. It was really a tragedy, a waste of resources.

Q: By this time, the communications explosion had begun. If you didn't have good solid computer skills in your population, you were going to be slipping farther and farther behind. Was that at all evident at that time?

RANSOM: They had a few computers then. They were beginning to take an interest in it. But what was quite apparent was that the security services were not going to allow Syrian access to the Internet. So, they were going to fall way behind. They simply wouldn't allow the use of computers. Even today, their use of the Internet is quite limited.

Q: What about the Syrian troops in Lebanon? Did we want them out?

RANSOM: Our focus was on the peace process. Until we resolved that, we paid lip service, but we didn't spend a lot of time on that.

Q: Were we seeing a pernicious effect from the commander of the Syrian army about the corruption coming from that rather free society in Lebanon?

RANSOM: As a matter of fact, the Syrian army, like everyone else in the government, was seriously underpaid. Through the corruption in Lebanon, a lot of them were able to make some livelihood. Fear of corruption from the Lebanese? There was some talk of it, but 800,000 Syrians outside the military were engaged in menial jobs in Lebanon. It was obvious that without the safety valve of Lebanon, Syria would have faced a lot of difficulty in terms of even higher unemployment and more unrest from the military itself.

Q: You are talking about a weak state, aren't you?

RANSOM: It's a society that's rotting from within. It's totally corrupt. The Syrians made a major oil discovery in the early '80s. Until the time when I was there as DCM, there was no line item in the budget for income from oil. It simply disappeared. Obviously, the President used that money to buy the loyalty of people. None of that money went to improve the infrastructure of the country. So, I assume that at some point the whole thing is going to collapse. But I don't know when. Probably not in the short run. The security and the military are quite strong. They were scared to death when they saw Ceausescu collapse in Romania. They could see the ramifications for a place like Syria.

Q: Did the Russians by this time play any role?

RANSOM: The Russians' role was much more limited. They refused to continue to supply the Syrian military with equipment without remuneration. In fact, they even insisted on getting money for their spare parts. Syria had never paid.

Q: What reports were we getting from the Military Attachés? If the Soviet Union couldn't supply arms and equipment, the Syrian military must have been going straight downhill.

RANSOM: Yes, it was. Their equipment was deteriorating. They still had the same system they had in the mid-'80s as well. You would think that each branch of the Syrian military would be outwardly faced to defend the country, but in fact, each branch was poised to watch the other branch for internal security breaches. This you could see if you drove around Damascus as I did with the Military Attaché. You could see how the different branches of the government were poised to watch the activities of another branch. It was the most extraordinary thing. I don't know how they ever managed to fight because the number of checks on the command structure was extraordinary. There was no room for any quickness of action.

Q: Did you have any problem with the Jewish wives that Stephen Solarz got involved with? There was a sizeable Syrian community.

RANSOM: They left Syria for the United States and Israel. Some went to Israel and a large number went to the U.S., to Brooklyn.

Q: How was your contact with the Syrian departments?

RANSOM: I found a very interesting change when I went back to Syria as DCM. When I was PAO, I managed to develop a really good relationship with the Presidential Spokesman, Jibran Kurlyah, who was very close to President Assad and had been with him for years and years. I could walk down to the Presidency and meet with him on a whole bunch of issues. It was an extremely useful relationship. So, when I went back to Syria, one of the first things I did was go down and call on my good friend, Jibran. I had two or three very productive meetings with him. Then word came back to me through one of the FSNs in the embassy that he could no longer see me because I was now a DCM. He made it clear that President Assad would not let him continue this relationship because I had moved from being PAO to DCM. I thought that was pretty funny. I tried my entire two years there to get around that barrier and he would not see me. I could go to his office when Secretary Christopher was in town. I would go to the palace. When everybody went in for the meetings, I could go sit and chat with Jibran, but there would be a couple others in the room. I never had any more of those one-on-one meetings. I went to the Minister of Information. I could call on different people in the government. I called on the Commerce Minister. I had a good relationship with the Deputy Prime Minister for Commercial Affairs and the Minister of Economy. I spent more hours than I like to recall in the Foreign Ministry. But, we never had any real good programs going with any government ministries, except for USIS in the cultural area.

Q: Did you have any major consular problems?

RANSOM: We had two or three embarrassing incidents. Talk about shooting yourself in the foot. There was a group of Yale alums who had made arrangements to travel to Syria for a two-week intensive tourism program. These programs are always so well done. But the travel agent, instead of getting them individual visas, arranged for a group visa, which meant that they all had to enter Syria together. Maybe five or six of them came early. I can remember being at the airport greeting another visitor and running into one of these elderly, distinguished Americans, who was being held in the horrific rooms at the airport because of the group visa business. I spent hours and the Ambassador spent hours on it. The Chef de Cabinet was mortified. He knew exactly what this was doing to Syria's position. But the power was in the hands of security and they wouldn't let these guys out. It took us two days to get them out. It was mortifying. That was one incident.

We would have problems if people showed up with any evidence of travel to Israel in their passports or any evidence of intent to travel there. Even if they had an airplane ticket that showed that they were going or had been, they were not allowed in the country. We had those issues to deal with all the time. We spent a lot of time trying to explain to people what

would happen if their passports said such things. But you don't get a hold of most people before they decide to come.

Also, I spent a lot of time trying to persuade the Syrians to give visas to different Americans, either Americans traveling privately or with journalists. It was an ongoing discussion. They knew pretty much which journalists they wanted to let in and which ones they didn't.

Q: Was CNN pretty well watched?

RANSOM: Oh, yes, very popular. They were able to get in more easily than the other networks or newspapers.

Q: You had been doing this for a while. By this time, were things like CNN and increased public awareness bringing any change?

RANSOM: We were seeing some changes in the newspapers, small changes. They had a Minister of Information who was trying to do a better job of coverage. He was trying to be helpful in getting journalists in. It was small. In the 10 years that I had been away from Syria, they had dropped a lot of the old Zionist terminology that they used in the papers and that was an improvement as well. But they still took the editorial tone from this guy Jibril Kuriyah. He did a radio broadcast every day at 2:00. You could listen to that and know what the news would be for the next 24 hours. That was the Syrian government pitch.

There was more freedom in some of the television programs. Certainly Egypt was taking the lead, but there was some greater leeway, but it was small still.

Q: How about how the Embassy was run? Had communications improved between Washington and Syria?

RANSOM: Oh, absolutely. Syrians were very good in allowing diplomatic pouches to move in and out of the country, better than many other countries I've lived in. That certainly helped us in terms of getting equipment in and that type of thing. So, I would say communications were pretty good. Because of the nature of the place, we discouraged Embassy people from using open Internet and that kind of thing. Of course, in terms of communications, you always knew your phone was tapped. But we were able to communicate.

Q: Did you find that the hand of Washington rested heavier on what you were doing because of communications, second-guessing or looking over your shoulder?

RANSOM: I felt that Washington was very tuned in to anything that dealt with the peace process and any events within Syria related to the peace process or to the Assad regime. Certainly the increase in ease of communications meant that you had to report more quickly and move more quickly. I didn't feel that the Department told us what to do every day, but certainly over my career, it's changed dramatically.

Q: There used to be the saying that there can be no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria. Was Syria considered the major player or was it moving more towards dealing with the Palestinians?

RANSOM: There was a report done that was called “State Department Strategy for the Year 2000.” I can’t remember what institution did it, but it listed countries in order of their importance and in resources. I can remember Chris Ross being very proud of the fact that Syria was 11th in the world in importance at that time, but 95th in resources.

Q: Why would it be that high?

RANSOM: Why would it be that important? It’s got to be the peace process. What else could it be?

Q: So, this was the American media?

RANSOM: I wish I could remember what institution did the report, but it was some report that commanded respect. Syria was right up there in terms of importance.

Q: Is there anything we haven’t touched on while you were there?

RANSOM: No, I think the major focus was on the peace process. I had wanted to talk a bit about how I felt going from PAO Cairo to DCM Damascus, the difference in the two jobs. I had acted as DCM a few times in Cairo, but it was the first time I had ever been assigned to a key State Department job. I thought especially because of the importance of the peace process in the Embassy mission, that for me it was a very attractive challenge. In Cairo, I had a huge budget and a big, talented staff and many, many programs, but Egypt already had a treaty with Israel. Our focus on the peace process in Egypt was primarily to keep the government and the people informed of what we were doing in the peace process. In management terms, my own office in Cairo challenged the size of the embassy in Damascus. It was a very big management job. Going to Syria was attractive to me because it meant that my daily life hopefully would be a little slower than it was in Cairo, where, frankly, I was being worn down. I was flattered that two ambassadors would recommend me for such a job. I had Ambassador Bob Pelletreau and Ned Walker. I thought since I probably would have more time, it would be easier to see my husband more often. That was our hope. We always had hope that we would manage to meet frequently. That first year, I was Chargé 12 weeks out of the year. There were disturbances in Bahrain when David was Ambassador. A lot of things were happening. Our goal was that each of us would travel once a month so that we would see each other every two weeks. We were lucky if we made it in six weeks. It was more often two months. It was pretty miserable. But at least when he came to Damascus, I could usually arrange to get away. We could get in our big station wagon and travel to some of the gorgeous sites in Syria. We could get out and see the country and see some of our old friends and get away from the telephone. In Cairo, it was impossible. I want to say that Syrian people are some of the nicest people in the whole area. They were very open and receptive to American diplomats, maybe partly because we didn’t get along with the Syrian government and also partly because so many Syrians emigrated to the U.S. It was just extraordinary how many Syrians had ties to the U.S. But their admiration for everything

about America from democracy and creativity to openness and pluralism was simply extraordinary. You'd feel it at strange moments much to the distress of our government contacts. But the government continued as it was, as I described it, so extraordinarily corrupt. The government in Syria manages to stifle any creativity or energy in the business community. They made everything illegal so that any time they wanted to get even with anybody, they had a law on the books that would enable them to do so. So, any businessman who wanted to accomplish anything in Syria had to have a patron in the military or the security services. The businessman would evoke this or that person in security as their guardian angel. It was very distressing. Before I left, there was talk about economic reform, about doing away with the law that made it illegal to deal in foreign currency. But there was always lots of talk.

End of interview